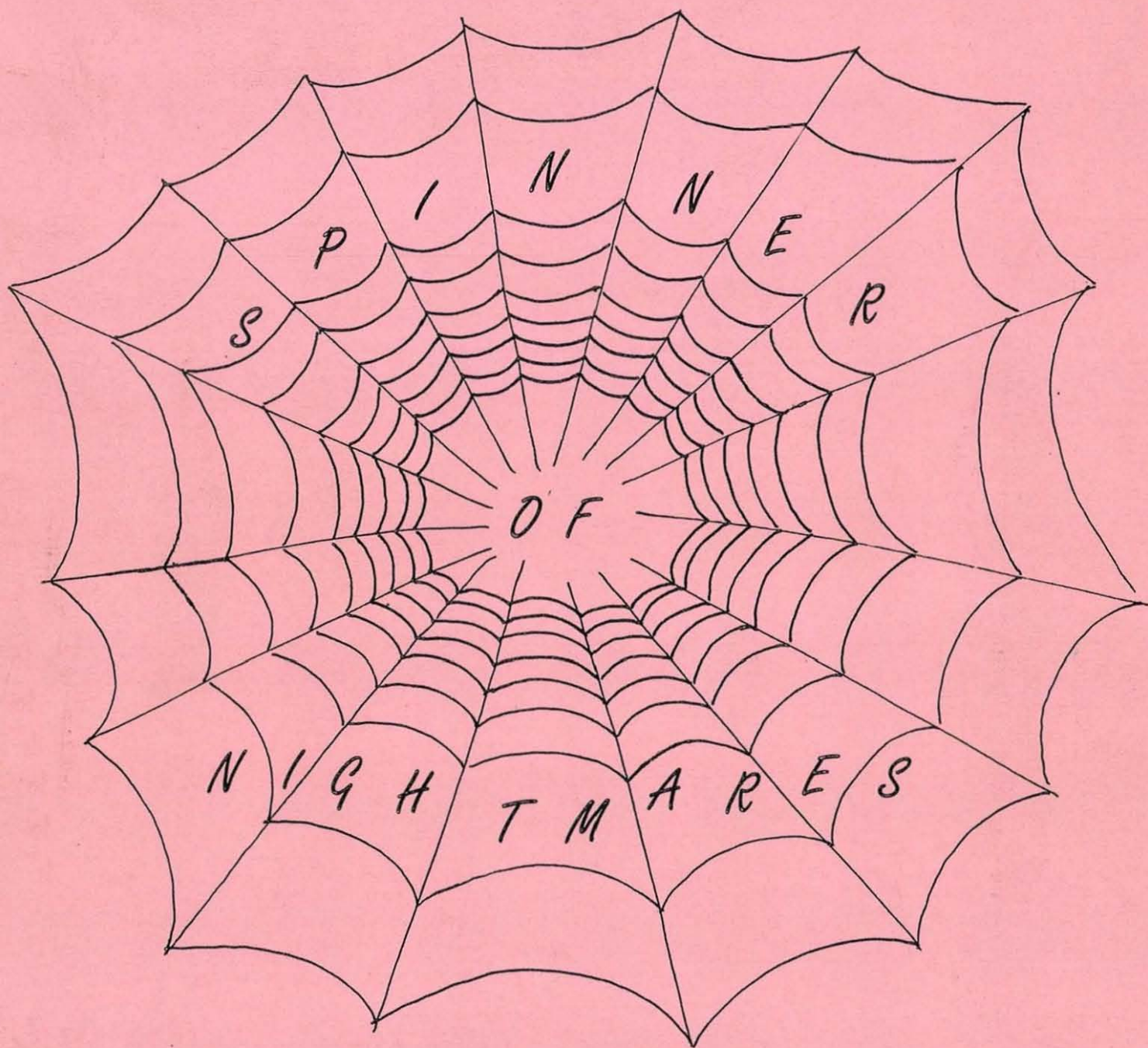


Scotpress



by

PAM BADDELEY

a Star Trek
fanzine

SPINNER OF NIGHTMARES

by

Pam Baddeley

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A ScoTpress publication

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ScoTpress - Sheila Clark, Valerie Piacentini, Janet Quarton & Shona

Hello, and welcome to Spinner of Nightmares. This sequel to Weaver of Dreams has been in the pipeline for quite some time - Pam has been working on it since Weaver of Dreams was printed.

I must apologise for the reduced print used in the zine. Pam presented us with a loooooong manuscript, all of which was necessary for the development of the story, but using our usual type, we would have ended up with a length of zine that would have given us some problems. As we saw it, we had three options;

- 1) split it into two volumes, sold together, because although we have the biggest Rexel stapler on the market it won't readily cope with more than 75 sheets of paper
- 2) put it out in one volume, spiral-bound
- 3) print it using a smaller typeface. This would cut the page count, allow us to staple it as usual, and - most importantly - keep the price down.

None of us are particularly happy with reduced-print zines, but we liked the first two options less. Janet experimented with the printing, and we decided that reduced print, keeping the distance between the lines the same as it would be using the large type, was the most legible - unlike most reduced print which shrinks the space between the lines as well. I hope you agree with us.

My thanks again go to Janet for typing out this zine.

1 RESIDENT TELEPATH

The face stares back at me out of the mirror. Pale, washed-out skin forms a livid contrast to the long black hair which frames it. The only colour in that face is the startlingly bright eyes - grandma's eyes - violet. Those eyes - and the silky black hair - are my only claims to attractiveness. But, really, they belong to someone else altogether - someone glamorous and extraordinary, not plain and unremarkable like me.

Well, plain maybe - but not so unremarkable. Though that's something I've been careful to keep a secret from most people - until now. Moodily, I turn away from the mirror and pick up some of the hair fasteners scattered on the dressing table. I'm due back on duty soon and I should pin my hair up again. Oh, hell - who cares? I sit down on the nearest of the two beds and put my head in my hands. That set-to with the Captain has shaken me up more than I thought. Though, of course, I expected a row when I went to his cabin.

Well, bang goes my promotion. Oh, I don't know: maybe the Captain won't hold that against me.

Who am I kidding?

The door slides open and Noreen enters. Dear old Noreen Hollis, the nosiest person I know. Somehow, I compose my face into a semi-cheerful expression.

"Well, what's wrong with you, Marianne? Message tape wasn't bad news, I hope?"

Not much, you do, Noreen: bad news is always such good copy. My heart sinks - impossible, I'd have thought, since it's already at boot level. Noreen's unerring recognition of the real emotions behind my mask never ceases to amaze me. "Not really, no. Nothing I hadn't been expecting."

"Well, go on, enlighten me," Noreen says, eagerly bouncing down on to the bed, beside me - all business. She enjoys hearing the problems of others so much that she should have been a social counsellor. For a moment, I wonder if I should tell her it was an invitation to my grandma's funeral or something. But never invite misfortune, as grandma herself says, and lies like that could easily lead to other repercussions, besides. Don't need anything drastic anyway: I've just thought of something that'll do wonderfully.

"I... er... I knew this boy... Before I joined the service, we..." I allow my voice to trail off feebly, hoping she'll fall for it.

"Oh, you poor thing." As usual, Noreen's sympathy is as syrupy as the juice grandma bottles her home grown fruit in. "Well, these things happen in the service, Marianne. We all knew that when we joined."

I nod, keeping my head down, more to hide my smirk of triumph than anything.

"Don't fret: you'll get over it - believe me. Look, why not come to a rec room with me tonight - it'll cheer you up."

My smirk rapidly wipes itself off my face but I manage to nod again. I asked for that, didn't I... another evening of Noreen's gossip. Still, perhaps I owe it to her for that lie - well, not exactly a lie. I did know a boy at home, though I never had anything going with him. Schooling my face to heroic martyrdom, I stand up quickly, go over to the mirror and begin pinning my hair up. "I... I have to go now, Noreen. I'm on duty shortly." I give her a final, wan smile and exit. Give this girl an Oscar!

As I walk briskly down the corridor toward the turbo lift, I feel tension easing off me, like a heavy burden slipping from my back. Noreen's a strain at the best of times but now... My mind goes back to getting the message tape a few hours ago.

I'd expected it, of course, ever since I'd sent in my vote and heard through the news service that an uninhabited earth-like world had been designated for colonisation and named Mardrata-va. The personal mail is always longer in arriving but finally it turned up - the vote had been overwhelmingly in favour of accepting the Federation's offer. The clans now have an official home and a chance to rebuild an identity. But now another tape had arrived bearing a command from my clan chief: grandma had sat there, holding up the authorisation for me to see, with Kledo's signature at the foot. He had commanded me to report to the Captain and identify myself as Mardratan. Apparently, it was one of the few conditions that the Federation High Council insisted on - they want to know how many Mardrata they have in Star Fleet. Not many, I'm sure.

Anyway, I'd sweated over it for quite a while, replaying the tape and studying the authorisation under a higher magnification. But there it was in black and white, its terms explicit and there was no way I could squeeze out of it. The order would have come more directly, grandma said - Kledo would have made a tape giving the order in person - if he hadn't been doing the round of the colonies and tracking down our scattered clan members. I'm quite disappointed that I missed him by a few months - he was on the Enterprise a few months before my transfer here. I was still on the Potemkin, then - just my luck.

Anyway, off I'd gone to the Captain's cabin - after checking that he was off-duty - with the feeling that old-time felons must have had when they left the condemned cell for their final journey. I arrived outside, my throat suddenly dry, and swallowed with difficulty before pushing the buzzer. "Come."

As the door slid open and I stepped inside, the Captain looked up from a report he had open on the desk before him. I took in the stack of tapes to his right and concluded that I probably hadn't chosen the best time.

"Yes, Ensign?" He gave me a dazzling smile that probably hid irritation at the interruption. I tried to return it, only succeeded with what felt like a stiff grimace, and held out my message tape.

"Ensign Raesdal, sir. I've been ordered to report to you - to tell you, Captain, that - I - I'm Marddratan."

The Captain, hand held out to take the tape, froze, his eyebrows rising in astonishment. Then his hand automatically closed around the square of plastic and he inserted it into the viewer on his desk. I waited as he faced the screen, his face illuminated by its display. When it was finished, he switched off and handed it back.

"Which... clan do you belong to?"

"The Casreem, sir: the telepaths." I could feel my face burn with embarrassment. Belatedly, he seemed to realise my plight for he invited me to sit down. I sank gratefully into the chair in front of his desk, my legs turning to jelly.

"I must admit, I hadn't expected a Marddratan among my crew," the Captain said, gallantly, his pleasant manner obviously designed to put me at my ease.

"I - I was transferred from the Potemkin recently, sir. I've only been aboard for three weeks."

The Captain nodded. "Service life must have presented you with a few problems, Ensign..." His voice trailed off and I could almost see the doubt click into place behind his eyes. "Medicals, for instance..."

My heart lurched unsteadily and I nodded, not daring to meet his eyes. Lost for words I hesitated, but the Captain was continuing. "In fact... I suppose that the only way you could conceal your anatomical difference to Humans... would be to influence the doctors who examined you, telepathically." I thought I detected an edge in his voice and looked up in alarm.

"Sir, please believe me, I - I had no choice."

The Captain nodded. "Ensign, I have to ask you this. Has your influence restricted itself to medicals?"

I felt myself flushing again. "I didn't like it any more than you, sir," I began, anger beginning to take hold. "I had to do it - to protect my people -"

"Whoa... Slow down, Ensign. That tape your family sent made it clear enough, surely? Starfleet wants to know how many Marddrata there are in the service, and when, if ever, they've used their abilities while serving. If you were still on the Potemkin, you'd be answering these questions in a confidential tape to Starfleet HQ - and that would probably be better for both of us - but, as I'm privileged to know about your people, you have to answer directly to me." He paused to check that I'd cooled down, then continued, "One last question: did you have any special reason for joining Starfleet?"

"No, just the usual ones people have, to explore, see other worlds, other races..." I suddenly saw red. "Why do they want you to ask that one? Do they think I joined to subvert Starfleet or something?" I glared at him, my mind working over-time. Surely Starfleet hadn't bothered to send him a special communique: questions to ask if you happen to have one of those troublesome aliens aboard? I was suddenly convinced that these were all questions of the Captain's own devising. I know the tape from home had said to co-operate, answer any questions, but hell!

"Ensign, I can only apologise if I've given offence. But if you'd been around politicians and diplomats as many

times as I have, you'd know how irritating they can be." He smiled, a dazzling smile that would have had half the female hearts on board fluttering, though it made no impact on mine: I was too angry. But I remembered, before I opened my big mouth again, just who I was facing. To hide my fury, I studied the whitened knuckles clasped together in my lap. "Let's choose to forget it, shall we?" I had nodded, keeping my head down. "Please report to sick bay for examination - Dr. McCoy has all the facts about Mardrata - you can speak freely to him."

"Yes, sir. I - I've never tried to influence anyone except for medicals - I - " I promptly dried up, sensing disapproval. "Yes, sir," I mumbled.

"Very well. Dismissed, Ensign." The Captain turned back to his report and I, shamefaced, my mind in turmoil, hurried out into the corridor and headed for sickbay.

The examination had been uncomfortable, too: once the Doctor heard what I had to say, he hadn't passed any comment but I could tell from his manner that he was thinking of how I'd influenced his mind during the routine medical I'd undergone when joining the ship. After that, I'd hurried back to the room I shared with Noreen, to brood, until she'd burst in on me.

The past few hours have passed almost as if in a daze. Somehow, I have managed to do my job, answer when people speak to me, but my mind's elsewhere. Still brooding over the Captain's reaction - wishing I hadn't blown up like that. After all, it was perfectly normal, wasn't it - the thought of having your mind tampered with still strikes fear into non-telepaths. That's why some people find Vulcans creepy. Though people here say the Captain and Spock - the Vulcan First Officer - are very close. Still, Vulcans are well known for their integrity: I don't suppose my reasons cut much ice with the Captain. After all, he doesn't know me, can't tell if I'm normally trustworthy, if I wouldn't pull a stunt like that again. Can't expect him to give me a chance, treat me like a person - not now.

Oh, quit that. My mind's going round in circles, not even making sense. Besides, it's unfair. Probably he was too surprised - didn't really mean it. Once he's thought it over...

Maybe he'll transfer me to another ship? That won't look good on my record. Nor will all the extra data - facts I covered up. Oh, hell.

Lieutenant Ngane is speaking to me: I force myself to concentrate. "You'll have to snap to it, Ensign. That's the second time you haven't heard an order."

"I - I'm sorry, Lieutenant," I say, feeling myself blush again, dammit! "It won't happen again."

"See that it doesn't. If you've finished that, you can help Ensign Cooper correlate the migration data." As she moves away I go over to Ensign Cooper. He winks.

"Don't let her put you off," he says, in a low voice. "She's all right when you get to know her." I nod, non-committally, and sit down. For a while we work through the information collected on the last planetary survey.

"How are you settling in, now? Find it different from the Potemkin?"

I shrug. "I wasn't really there long enough to form much of an impression."

"It's a good ship, I hear, but you'll find this one's even better."

"Yeah, I know." Couldn't keep the resentment out of my voice that time.

"What's the matter? Don't you like it here?"

I shrug. "It's all right, I suppose."

"Well, you don't sound very sure about it. Why not give us a proper chance before you - "

"Ben!" I snap, then sense everyone looking round at us. I redden but continue, "It's all right, just drop it - okay?"

"Right."

Well, that's the end of a beautiful friendship, I expect, judging from the way Ben promptly shuts up and refuses to look at me. After ten minutes of tightlipped non-communication, I decide that I'd better try to patch things up. "Ben, er - I'm sorry for snapping at you just now, just a bit tense."

"That's all right. Forget it."

No, I can tell it isn't forgotten, is it Ben? You're still not looking at me and your cold, all-business manner is freezing me out. Well, who needs you, anyway? From the impression I made on the Captain, I probably won't be staying on this lousy ship much longer.

Coffee break and I'm on my own. I sit down at a table in the rec room, aware that Ben has pointedly steered himself away to another. In fact there are plenty of people sitting and chatting at all the other tables - I'm the only odd one out. Too true. Judging from the way I'm being ostracised, word sure gets round quickly on this ship. Or perhaps it's my imagination: it's only that I'm not in with a clique. Well, that'd be nothing new. Either way, I'm better off not bothering with them - for one thing, it's never wise to get too chummy with Humans. Even now, if they knew what I was - a telepath - how many wouldn't edge away, wariness in their eyes, thinking I was going to take them over or rifle through their most private thoughts? Best they just think me an antisocial misfit who doesn't like the Enterprise - don't suppose they could think of a worse crime, anyway.

For the first time, it strikes me: what am I doing out here - like the Captain said? All my childhood longing for the stars, other planets - and for what? Cooped up in a tin box with a lot of Humans who wouldn't want me here if they knew what I really was. The only thing I've got to look forward to is my turn on landing party duty and who knows when that'll be? If I'd stayed at home, I'd have been sent to Mardrata-va by now, with the rest of my family.

An overwhelming surge of homesickness takes me by surprise. Grandee, Mark - their faces well up before me as I stare down into my coffee. The cup blurs as I blink back tears - don't be so sorry for yourself - and stand up. I'm due back on duty.

Walking back, I meet Ben Cooper - I can practically feel the cold air at ten paces. I'll say one thing for him - he certainly knows how to nurse a grudge. I decide it's not worth the effort of trying to scale this particular iceberg. The rest of the shift I exchange only the minimum of conversation with him that politeness and the demands of work require.

Ngame's obviously a pretty observant woman because she stops me on the way out, not speaking till the others are gone.

"Perhaps I'd better explain something, Raesdal. My team is a smoothly running piece of machinery. I wouldn't want anything to disrupt its function - someone who won't make the effort to fit in, for instance."

Raging inside, I keep quiet, though I feel my traitorous face begin to redden.

"You've been here three weeks, Ensign. That should be long enough for you to get to know everyone."

As casually as I can, I remark, "I do know everyone -"

"Maybe you do, but you and Ensign Cooper have been making things so frosty in here, I expected to see icicles along the work benches. Is it anything to do with you snapping at him earlier?"

I shrug. "It was just a minor misunderstanding. You must have heard me try to apologise but he wouldn't have any of it. He's been like that ever since."

Ngame nods. "Well, okay, I'll have a word with him, see if I can straighten this out. Okay, run along, Ensign."

I exit with as much dignity as I can muster: run along! I'm surprised she didn't pat me on the head!

The last two days haven't been too good. Apart from the sheer boredom of much of the routine work - sorting, cataloguing - there's also the prospect of 'getting along' with the rest of Lieutenant Ngame's well lubricated machinery. On the surface, everything's hunky dory with Ensign Cooper but it doesn't take a mind probe to tell that he still doesn't like me and his pleasantness is under sufferance.

As well as all that, I've been expecting a summons from the Captain - or maybe something in the internal mail to

tell me when I'm to be transferred - but nothing yet. I did get some good news - I've been picked for a landing party on Sigma Orionis IV, just a few days away. A 'new girl' like me! It's only routine, of course; it's not the first survey and the planet seems devoid of intelligent life but we're to check it again to make sure. Well, at least it'll be a break from this place...

Beaming down at last! The past few days have been unbearable: waiting and waiting - something I've never been very good at.

I blink and look around me. Well, what did you expect, Mari? We're standing in a clearing: around us are large bushes clothed in dark foliage. Well, all right; it doesn't look much, but there's grass at our feet and the air. Feel that gentle breeze, smell the fresh scent of growing things. Gorgeous!

Recollecting myself, I activate my tricorder, sensing Lieutenant Ngame's disapproving glare. She's along on this trip to ensure that the ill-fitting cog doesn't put an electro spanner in the works.

After the initial scan, we're pairing off with a security guard each and moving away. The Captain heads in one direction with his shadow, Spock in another, and me, the Lieutenant and the rest of the company also part. I risk a backward glance at the Vulcan: this has been my first good look at him. I also relax my mental shields a little - I had them up really tight while he was near. I know Vulcans are only supposed to be touch telepaths but I'd be surprised if they can't pick up some of the emotions people are beaming out around them. Wouldn't do for him to pick up my irritation with Lieutenant Ngame's patronising attitude or my resentment of the Captain, would it?

Speaking of the Captain, he didn't bat an eyelid when he stepped onto the transporter pad in front of me; just gave me a friendly nod. Anyone'd think we'd never had that unpleasant set-to the other day.

As we wander slowly through the bushes, me recording data on the (mostly unseen) animals in the vicinity, my bodyguard chats to me. He's Phil Surrey, he tells me, has been on the ship for nearly two standard years. I can tell he enjoys the job - especially now, as he glances alertly round at the terrain, no doubt taking in all the little details of sound, smell and movement that pass me by.

Soon, our chronometers tell us it's time to return to the clearing for our rendezvous with the others. Accordingly, we start making our way back. Then a sudden warble from my communicator startles me from the more relaxed and happy mood that this planet's put me in. I flip open the lid.

"Ensign Raesdal, get back here right away. There's been an accident," the familiar voice of the Lieutenant snaps. Even before she finishes speaking, I feel it - like a blast wave - or a wave of heat - rolling over me...

"Ensign! Marianne, are you all right?"

I blink, dazed, and find I'm leaning on Phil for support. His anxious face comes into focus. "Fine, just dizzy. Come on, Phil - we've got to get back."

We break into a run, me fumbling to replace my communicator and unclip my phaser. I succeed, just as we burst into the clearing. Lieutenant Ngame and her guard are there, likewise the botanist - didn't catch her name - and the geologist, Sias, and two other security men. But no sign of the Captain or Spock.

"What is it, Lieutenant?"

Her dark face is creased in worry. "We had a call from Mr. Spock, telling us to return here immediately. He said the Captain had had an accident. But there's no sign of them." As she finishes explaining, she adjusts her communicator. "Captain? Mr. Spock? Come in please."

I wonder for a moment why they haven't tried pinpointing the positions of the others with the tricorders, then realise that the other two scientists are doing just that. Belatedly, I put away my phaser and unsling my tricorder to join them.

"There's nothing, Lieutenant," the botanist is saying. "No trace of humanoid life - "

"Keep trying." Briskly, the Lieutenant turns to the guard beside her: the most senior, I suppose. "We'll have to head roughly in the same direction as the others. If we split the party in two, we'll cover the ground more quickly - "

Her voice trails off. I look up from my scanning and follow her shocked gaze to the edge of the clearing. Spock stands there - or rather, leans against one of the stout bushes. Blood is running down his face from a cut across his forehead. There's more on his shirt - and some of it is red. We barely have time to take all this in before his knees are buckling under him. We rush forward - Lieutenant Ngame is quickest and catches him. He seems to be out cold.

A couple of the guards take the First Officer as Ngame produces her communicator again. "Enterprise, come in please." I have to admire the way she takes charge of everything. While she's bringing the Enterprise up to date, I shoulder my tricorder and move off to the edge of the clearing, facing the direction that the Captain took, as far as my memory serves me. Then... this is taking a hell of a risk, but no one knows that better than me... I lower my shields and send as hard as I can. "Captain! Captain!"

Nothing. I risk it again, aware that the wave of thought energy that hit me before could come crashing in again - this time against my unshielded mind. Still nothing. I quickly re-erect my barriers and turn back to the others.

"Get over here, Ensign; we're beaming up!" snaps Ngame. Hastily, I comply.

Back on the Enterprise, Spock is taken in charge by the medical staff waiting in readiness, and wheeled away on a trolley, a worried looking Doctor McCoy in attendance. Never thought I'd be glad to get back to this sterile metal cage but these walls suddenly look very friendly after a harmless seeming planet has turned hostile. I feel a touch on my arm and look round at Phil.

"Marianne, I think you ought to go to sickbay. That dizzy spell you had - anything like that on an alien planet has to be checked out."

Normally I'd resent anyone fussing, but I realise that Phil's right. Besides, McCoy's the only one on this ship now - till Spock recovers - with official clearance to know about the Mardrata, and I have to tell someone what I felt. I smile in what I hope is a reassuring way. "All right, Phil, but don't worry. And thanks."

As I hurry along the corridor to the nearest turbo lift, I turn over the facts in my mind. The bridge must be scanning for the Captain and the two security guards even now, but I know they won't find anything. They're either dead or - or what? Not behind a psi barrier, because my sending wasn't blocked by anything. A natural substance that screens out telepathic projections - possible, I suppose? But it's simpler to suppose they're dead. Occam's Razor, right? The simplest theory to fit the facts.

I try to analyse my feelings. Regret? Yes, I suppose I am sorry - I know he was a good Captain. The way everyone speaks about him - practically hero worshipping, some of them - tells me that. He's what they used to call a 'legend in his own lifetime'. Even though we rubbed each other up the wrong way, I can still appreciate his value - feel sorry he's dead.

Sickbay. As I enter, I'm aware of the concentrated activity around the bed. No one's flustered or over-hasty but everything is smoothly co-ordinated, efficient - like Lieutenant Ngame's machine. Only here, I can actually see it operating. And at the centre of it, is McCoy, holding it all together. In his own way, I can see he runs a tight ship. I stand by the door, feeling lost, useless - an outcast.

McCoy finally steps back to study the diagnostic panel. All the markers are hovering low down, barely above the zeros.

"It's no good, Doctor." There's a note of despair in the blonde nurse's voice as she turns to look at him. Is that a tear in her eye - but she blinks rapidly and, whatever it was, is gone.

"He's gone so far down into his own mind..." McCoy murmurs, as if to himself. Then he notices me and his demeanour changes. "Is it urgent, Ensign? We have our hands full at the moment."

I glance self-consciously down at my own hands, see that I've been twisting them, and pull them apart. "It - it's something that happened on the planet, Doctor. Something that might help." I look up and our eyes meet. He relaxes a little - what did he read in my eyes? - and says, more kindly:

"Come into the office for a moment."

Inside, he indicates a seat and takes another, behind a desk cluttered with tapes, clipboards, and internal memos. Nervously, I start to tell him about my experience. He listens right through, intently, without interrupting.

"And you think that whatever attacked Spock was telepathic - intelligent?"

I shrug. "I don't know about intelligent - there are lower lifeforms on other planets which can trap prey telepathically. All I know is, I felt a psychic attack - and I don't think it was aimed at me. And - " I falter.

"Go on."

"It staggered me - and I was shielded. Quite a distance from it, too, since the Captain and Spock went in the opposite direction to me. At close range - well, it's put Spock into a coma and he must have been shielded. The - the Captain wouldn't have stood a chance."

Abruptly, McCoy stands and paces the office. "I can't believe that, Ensign. You don't know the Captain - he has a very strong mind."

"You didn't feel that shock wave, Doctor. I did. Unless he was shielded somehow..."

The Doctor moves to the doorway. "Well, thank you for telling me all this, Ensign - "

"Before I go, Doctor, there's something else." I stand, trying to keep my legs from trembling. "Mr. Spock's mind has had a severe shock. I might be able to bring him back." I see the doubt in his eyes. "Doctor, you know what I am - are there any other telepaths aboard who'd be strong enough?"

"I don't know that you're strong enough, Ensign. I haven't seen your psionic profile yet."

"It's Marianne, Doctor, please. I've never had an official test but I know I'm strong - very strong. It runs in the family."

"Have you ever done anything like this before?" When I shake my head, he continues, "Then I can't allow it. You - you could get trapped in there with him, couldn't you?"

"Doctor, if you don't let me, he'll sink deeper and deeper until he loses hold on life altogether. That's the effect of severe psychic shock. Unless there's intervention - soon - he'll die."

McCoy shakes his head but I can tell by his expression - one of weariness, anxiety and defeat - that he won't refuse my help. As I step toward him, he asks, "Why should you do this - risk yourself in this way? You don't even know Spock."

I shrug, not really knowing why myself, until this moment. Then I find myself answering, "I suppose... well, I want to belong - I don't want to be an outsider any more - a monster."

McCoy smiles wanly, his blue eyes very bright. "You're not a monster, Marianne. If you can bring Spock out of this... Well, I appreciate you trying."

Together, we move out of the office and over to the bed where Spock lies motionless, his life hovering on the brink. Now that I'm about to do this, I feel strange, lightheaded, my heart racing madly. Our Mardatan equivalent of adrenalin? But I can't fight - or run. I've made my decision. I sit in the chair that McCoy has pulled up to the bedside, and lean forward. Physical contact isn't necessary for my people, but sometimes it helps - especially when the other mind is so far away. Hesitantly, I take Spock's left hand in both of mine and close my eyes...

Dark... it's so dark... I nearly pull away but I know I must go on. Surrendering, I sink slowly down, the little patch of light above receding and shrinking like daylight at the top of an old time mine shaft. An odd thought crosses my mind; this is like falling down the well in the book I read a lot when I was young - "Alice in Wonderland". But there are no little cupboards and shelves with maps and jars of marmalade on the walls of this shaft - nothing but featureless blackness.

I try extending my thoughts downwards. Spock? Spock? I've come to help you. My words come back to me like echoes in an empty space.

Wait! Just then - a sound? Yes, a thought tendril drifting down more slowly than the rest. I reach for it desperately as someone drowning might clutch at a straw. Spock? SPOCK!

Yes, there it is!

Who...? Who is it...? The thought is tinged with pain, forced out by a great effort.

Spock, I'm Marianne Raesdal; I was in the landing party with you. I've come to help you.

Raesdal? The... Mardatan...?

Oh, so the Captain did find time to tell him about it. As the thought crosses my mind, unbidden, I feel Spock latch onto it. The Captain... Where?

We - we don't know. He's missing - we need your help to find him. Perhaps the gods will forgive me for saying that, despite my own inner conviction, but the Humans always say that where there's life, there's hope. The important thing at the moment is giving Spock both of those.

Spock, come with me...

I feel... our minds drifting together... No, there's still an inner kernel of me but all the outer part - memory - that's merging with Spock's, getting mixed up. I think he senses my fear of getting 'trapped' as McCoy called it, because he's reassuring me, without words. I'm calmer now... We start to drift upwards, our thoughts intertwined. I can see his friendship with the Captain... yes, friendship between two such disparate natures, more alien to each other than my people to Humans. I see the Captain - Jim - as Spock sees him, and understand how petty I've been. A deep regret washes over me...

What is it?

Oh, nothing...

Something happened on the planet... I must try to remember...

Don't try now, Spock. First things first, eh?

Drifting up... up... almost lazily. It's surprising how easily I pulled him out of it... thought I'd have a rough time... It's almost as if that first tendril of thought wasn't drifting down at all, but already coming back up, to meet me... No, that is illogical, we know that... I know... what? What was it just now - something - something important - must remember... No, no it wasn't... couldn't have been, could it...

The light - it's above us now, coming closer, faster and faster. As we near it, I sense Spock pull away, gently disentangling his memories from mine. Of course - I've seen how experienced he is at melding with other races... easy with practice, right? And this wasn't really a meld, our innermost thoughts stayed enclosed - private. Just as well, really. I feel ashamed of some of mine.

There's a sudden jolt and I can hear noises - the sickbay sounds, people moving quietly about, the hum of instruments, a cough in the next room. I open my eyes - oww - and shut them tightly again; the overhead lighting is unbearably bright. I try opening them a fraction, allowing my mind to adjust to receiving outside stimuli again. My body feels odd - shapeless like a dress that's two sizes too large - I'll have to get used to it again. Yes, the feeling is going away already... draining from me. Heck, I'm still holding Spock's hand.

I let go fast, reddening with embarrassment, and feel his gaze on me.

"Thank you, Ensign." He moves to sit up but McCoy is quick to forestall him.

"Oh, no you don't, Spock. You're staying put till I've checked you out. And, Marianne - go and lie down."

I'm in no mood to argue, feeling tired by the moment. Push myself out of this chair... come on, one foot then the other... I flop heavily onto the next bed, too exhausted to get under the covers. Blurrily, I see the blonde nurse: this time, those really are tears on her cheeks - or are they? Just my eyes, I suppose... can hardly... see straight... eyelids so... heavy...

Awareness again. I'm lying down... where? The ceiling's there, above me but I've no memory of opening my eyes. I move my head... Sickbay. Yes, I remember - I've just pulled off the universe's greatest rescue - well, slight exaggeration, maybe. And 'just'? Spock's bed is empty: no knowing how long I've been out. Still, at least one of them is safe... A pang of grief surprised me then - relax! Phew, what was that? A hangover from Spock's memory? Some

of his memories of the Captain anyway - impressed themselves on my mind. Grandma warned me that might happen if I ever linked with a non-Mardratan. Previously, my melds were all with her and Mark. Lucky it wasn't a full meld... still, she said they should wear away fairly soon - it's only a temporary effect.

I sit up and instantly see the blonde nurse, her back to me, at the far end of the room. She turns, smiles and approaches.

"How long have I been asleep?"

"Forty-eight hours or so. I think you needed it."

"Forty-eight - that long? Is Mr. Spock all right now?"

A flicker of - what? Doubt, anxiety? Whatever it was, it crossed her face and was gone, replaced now by professional reassurance. "He's fine. Doctor McCoy discharged him shortly after you fell asleep. He's been back on duty ever since."

I sit up and pull back the cover, realising as I do so that I'm wearing a night gown. I'm normally a light sleeper; I must have been well under if they managed to undress me. "I feel all right now, nurse. Can I get up?"

"We'll have to see. Doctor McCoy will want to examine you first. Wait right here and I'll get him." As she moves away, I call her back.

"Nurse, I - what's been happening while I've been asleep? Did they - did they find any trace of what happened to the Captain and the others?"

"No, they... they've been declared officially dead."

Well, I expected it, didn't I? "Thanks, nurse."

Waiting for the Doctor, I turn things over in my mind. Did Spock find those responsible? Then McCoy enters, looking bright, breezy and professional... so why do I feel he's concealing some concern, like the nurse. Maybe it's because the bags under his eyes look heavier, with fatigue.

I submit passively to the examination, waiting for a good moment to question him.

"Well, Marianne, you're in pretty good shape. I reckon you can report for duty." He nods to the nurse, who leaves the room; presumably to fetch me some clothes.

"Doctor, I... I take it we've left Sigma Orionsis IV?"

"Yes, that's so." McCoy half-turns away, suddenly busy with his medical instruments.

"I - I suppose all possible checks were made - to trace whoever attacked the Captain?"

McCoy's very bright blue eyes flash up to meet mine. "Do you know something I don't, Marianne?"

"Well... no, I - "

"Spock ordered a full sensor sweep of the planet's surface, as well as a 360 degree scan of that region of space. They found nothing." Flatly, McCoy returns to checking the instruments. I can tell he's holding something back: maybe he didn't think Spock looked hard enough but he'd hardly open up to me - an Ensign - on that.

"Then there's... there's no possible doubt about the Captain?"

"Not according to Spock. According to him, the danger to the ship was too great to hang around there any longer."

"I see..." Of course, Spock was there: if he's remembered what happened, he's in a better position to estimate the risks, but... "It's strange though... That was a powerful blast but I wouldn't have thought it powerful enough to affect the ship..." I'm talking out loud, more than anything. I shrug. "Still, Mr. Spock must know best, being on the spot - "

"Precisely, Ensign."

I nearly jumped a foot off the floor then! I turn quickly and see Mr. Spock himself standing in the doorway, calmly eyeing us both, his hands clasped casually behind his back. McCoy's involuntary movement, instantly checked, tells me he's just as surprised. We were both so preoccupied, we never noticed the door open... I mean, I think I heard it but must have assumed it was the nurse returning. How long has he been there... and what exactly have I been saying? Enough to amount to insubordination? I feel my face grow hot again - oh, why do I always have to look so damned guilty?

"Sir, I... I thought perhaps I could help - "

Spock steps into the room, allowing the door to close behind him. "I can assure you, Ensign. If there had been any possibility of the Captain still being alive, I would have remained to continue the search - as the Doctor can testify from previous occasions." Here, his eyes meet McCoy's and the Doctor sheepishly nods. "However, the nature of the assault upon us was such that there was no chance of that. The Captain was instantly vapourised by a force weapon of some kind." McCoy closes his eyes and moves away. "I'm sorry, Doctor," Spock continues, softly, then returns his attention to me. "The shock wave which you sensed was directed against me. When I regained consciousness, moments later, our assailant was gone."

I feel a lump in my throat - but I didn't even know him really. Spock's second-hand memories again, I suppose. I swallow it, and ask, "But your attacker - what was it?"

"A humanoid female. We detected no craft in the region, so it would appear that the planet is, after all, inhabited."

"But couldn't they have kept the planet between their craft and the Enterprise? Or they could have been left there while their ship went elsewhere - "

"Ensign, I can assure you that every possibility has been considered. Although we could find no trace of our assailant, I judged it prudent, in view of her obvious abilities, to withdraw and not endanger the ship's personnel in a pointless pursuit of vengeance - which the Captain would not have wanted."

Beside me, McCoy opens his mouth to speak but closes it again. He has lost out on this contest before.

"Full particulars have been transmitted to Starfleet... They may wish further investigation to determine the merit of your last suggestion, but I suspect they will wish to place the planet off-limits."

"Thanks to a strong recommendation from you," McCoy puts in. Yes, there is a strong disagreement between them on this - as I thought earlier. Spock merely raises an eyebrow.

"Sir," I persist - I like sticking my neck out, don't I? "If they actually live there, how could they have been overlooked before? Oh - unless they have other powers - " Ask a silly question.

"Such as the illusion-creating ability possessed by some of your people? Yes, Ensign."

Confused, I grope for a way out. Glimmer of inspiration - "Maybe your tricorder could help, sir - "

"Unfortunately, when I awoke, it was gone, as were the two security guards. Unless the alien took them prisoner, they were probably vapourised trying to defend us. I suspect the latter: my memory is unclear on some points."

I sense it's time to leave... cross-examining the First Officer - if I keep this up, I really will have a career to look forward to. Probably sweeping the loading bay of an ore carrier, if I'm lucky.

"You may go, Ensign."

"Th-thank you, sir." I practically dive past him, breathing a sigh of relief as the door shuts behind me.

Out in the corridor, I find the nurse waiting for me, holding a pile of clothes. "I... er, Mr. Spock said you weren't to be disturbed or I'd have brought them in."

I thank her, taking the clothes, and duck into one of the side wards to get changed. Then it strikes me... He must have expected me to be 'difficult' if he didn't want any more witnesses. Perhaps it was to spare me embarrassment.

Or perhaps - I don't know Spock at all, except for what I've learned of his memories of course, but... Even though he behaved perfectly normally, there was something... creepy about him just now.

Oh, well, maybe I'm a xenophobe. Chalk up another sterling quality to me, along with the cynicism and anti-social tendencies. But that doesn't completely account for it - after all, I got on pretty well at the Academy with an Andorian - as well as I can be said to get on with anyone. And I never felt like this in the presence of one of our class teachers who was Vulcan. Strange...

Stupid me. Fancy expecting streamers, balloons and a big banner saying, "Welcome home Marianne". As far as the well-oiled machine is concerned, I haven't done anything more heroic than lie in sickbay for a few days after a dizzy spell. Still, it was good of Phil to drop by and see how I was - apparently, he did enquire about me when I was in sickbay but they told him I was sleeping it off. Anyway, nice to know someone cares.

As for the team, things are pretty much as before, though the Lieutenant keeps giving me odd looks. Maybe she thinks I shammed the whole thing to dodge some work - I'm tempted to probe and find out, but that's counter to my training. A sense of ethics is drilled into all Casreem from the start. I can see the funny side of it: she probably thinks I'm a skivver and I can't tell her how heroic and self-sacrificing I've been.

Mid-morning break at last. But, as I'm going out the door, the Lieutenant comes across to waylay me. This is getting to be a habit of hers.

"The nurse told me you have a high psi profile, Ensign," she says: nothing like getting to the point. I didn't even realise that any of the nurses knew - and I'm sure they wouldn't breach a confidence like that if they did. "Apparently, that's why you were affected by the alien. Have you ever had anything before - premonitions, that sort of thing?"

Well, it's obvious her source hasn't told her everything. "I've never had a premonition, Lieutenant." Well, that's true enough: I don't have any precog inheritance.

"Oh, I just wondered... These things interest me," she says, smiling tightly. I copy her: God, she's trying to be friendly! No wonder she seems so odd; it must be an unnatural strain. Now, now, Marianne - dismiss these uncharitable thoughts.

"Let's go to coffee, shall we?"

I nod and we leave the room. Over coffee in the nearby rec room, I slowly thaw a little in response to her attempts at chit-chat. At least it's company for a change. Then I perk up at something she says.

"It's a shame you missed the memorial service, though: it was very moving. Some people broke down."

"When was that?"

"Oh, the day after we left the planet - yesterday: it seems like centuries ago," the Lieutenant smiles apologetically. "I still can't believe it. The Captain was so vital, so alive."

For a moment, I think the Lieutenant's going to do some breaking down of her own and rust the machinery, but then she wipes a hand across her eyes. Then a cheery voice makes me look up. "Hello, Marianne, Lieutenant."

"Oh, hello, Phil. Want to join us?"

"Love to... That is, if the Lieutenant doesn't mind?" He looks questioningly at her but she shakes her head.

"No, go right ahead. I'm getting back to the labs anyway."

Phil sits as she leaves. "Glad to see you're recovered."

"Yes... I'm sorry, I should have got word to you. I heard how you asked after me."

Phil shrugs, a twinkle in his blue eyes. "As long as you're all right, I don't mind. Hell of a thing though... They have told you?"

"About the Captain? Yes, everyone's pretty cut up, I can see. Even the Lieutenant..." I frown. "Something's... something's not quite right though... Phil, run through what happened for me, will you? From when we got back to the clearing."

"Well... Lieutenant Ngame and the others were there, trying to get a fix on the Captain and Mr. Spock. And the Lieutenant was trying to reach them on her communicator."

"She said there'd been an accident, didn't she? I mean, when she contacted us and told us to get back. How could she have known that?"

"Oh, I asked Ruskin about that afterwards - he was assigned to her." I realise he's referring to the Lieutenant's security 'shadow'. "Apparently, she got a call from Mr. Spock, saying the Captain had been injured and she was to tell everyone to return to the glade right away."

I remember now what the Lieutenant said. But an objection occurs to me. "Why would he say injured? Unless he didn't want to panic people... No, wait! That would mean - he must have contacted her before I felt the psychic shock wave!" Abruptly, I realise that I've just confessed to being psychic but Phil doesn't seem to have noticed. A frown creases his forehead however, worry dimming that sparkle in his eyes I noticed earlier. "Maybe the Captain was injured at first, then the woman killed him and attacked Spock."

I lean forward, keeping my voice low. As far as I can tell, no one's attention has been alerted by our conversation but best to be sure. "Strange how he never mentioned that, don't you think?"

"Well... not really. That shock you felt probably affected his memory. Ordinary shock does that to Humans, after all."

I nod. Spock did say his memory was unclear... and Phil knows something too... like the Lieutenant. "Who told you I was psychic, Phil?"

"Huh? Oh, I'm not... one of the nurses, I think." He looks really blank for a moment, then snaps out of it. "Yes, it must have been."

Well, this nurse must be a real blabbermouth. McCoy better plug that leak in his department on the double. But it's nice to know that Phil doesn't seem bothered by me being a little... unusual. There's something more important to worry about now, however. The doubts are still nagging at my mind. "Phil... go on with what you were telling me, please."

"Well... The Lieutenant was organising a search. Then we realised Spock was there. He looked pretty bad - cut his forehead. I guess he must've fallen against something -"

"That's it!" I exclaim, then subside as people look round. Impatiently, I wait till they get fed up and go back to their small talk, then speak quietly to Phil, trying to keep my excitement under control.

"That's what was bothering me! There was red blood on Spock's shirt. It must've been the Captain's."

The expected reaction doesn't come. Instead, Phil shrugs with a 'so-what' air. "Well, we've already figured that out. The blood just confirms it..." He leans forward too, face creased in sudden consternation. "You're not suggesting that Spock killed them all, and destroyed their bodies with a phaser, are you? If you are, Marianne, it won't wash. It doesn't explain what you felt and full strength phaser blasts would have registered on someone's tricorder, even if I could believe it."

"No, no, of course not, Phil," I hasten to reassure him. "It's like you said - the alien woman did it."

Phil relaxes, grinning with relief. "I must admit you had me worried there for a moment - those two men were friends of mine; I wouldn't want to think Spock killed them. And he couldn't have killed the Captain: if you'd been here for longer, you'd know that." He grows more sombre. "I don't think we'd better mention any of this to anyone else, though. I wouldn't want you put on report or transferred under a cloud."

I shake my head. "I won't say a word, Phil. I was just being silly, that's all. Forget it." I can see I've managed to ease his mind, which is a relief: wish I could say the same for mine. I glance at my chronometer. "Hell, is that the time? I must get back - the Lieutenant'll feed me to a Berengarian dragon."

Phil grins as I stand up. "Are you free this evening?"

"I think so..." What am I talking about? I'm always free. "Yes, yes, I am."

"See you in Rec room six? Lieutenant Uhura's giving a concert there."

"Love to. About twenty-hundred hours, all right?" He nods and I rush off to face the Lieutenant's music.

Oddly enough, she doesn't even mention how late back I am. "Glad to see you're settling in now, Marianne. You seem to have made quite a hit with Ensign Surrey."

I shrug, shyly. The Lieutenant beams beneficently - what's got into her? - before turning away to see to the rest of her charges. I settle down to work on the tricorder readings that I made during the landing party; despite my anticipation about tonight and the other matters preying on my mind, it's interesting work...

The rest of my shift passes quite quickly, though I still find the odd moment to consider the puzzling anomalies in what happened on Sigma Orionis IV. Despite what I told Phil, I'm still not happy about it. Maybe everyone else was too caught up in the tragedy to query the conflicting sequence of events: perhaps it's taken an outsider to view it objectively. I just know something's wrong.

Still, I feel better for having made a firm decision. Tonight, after I leave Phil, I'm going to try an experiment. But it'll have to be somewhere out of the way... not my cabin, that's for sure. The observation gallery...? Shouldn't be anyone up there late... Ah, here's Phil...

I yawn surreptitiously behind my hand, but nothing escapes Phil's notice: it's his training. "I guess it is late."

"It's been nice, though, really nice. Lieutenant Uhura's a pretty good singer - and musician." I sip at the last of my coffee, and put on my best 'can't keep my eyes open' impression, though I feel a bit guilty about it.

"I think we'd better call it a day. After all - we've both got work in the morning."

I nod a sleepy agreement though I've rarely felt less sleepy in my life. Must be all that 'adrenalin'. "Oh, well," I say, getting up. "Better turn in then."

"Turn in?" Phil looks puzzled.

"Oh, sorry, one of my quaint expressions. We're an odd lot on Praxis Major; very conservative."

As we head along the corridor to the nearest turbo lift, Phil asks, "Shall I walk you 'home'?"

"No, that's all right, thanks. I don't think I'll get lost now - I've been here a whole month as of today."

"Really? You should've told me: I could have laid on a celebration."

"No, really, Phil. This has been my celebration. It's been really nice."

The turbo lift halts: it's my deck.

"I'm glad you've enjoyed yourself. Well... I'll say good night, then."

"Good night, Phil. Pleasant dreams." I head out into the corridor and walk on as the door closes. Pleasant dreams - that's what grandma always said as she tucked me up in bed years ago. Won't be any of them for me tonight though; this will probably take the rest of the ship's 'night'. As the lift hums into life once more, I stop and look up and down the corridor to check that it's deserted. Everything looks a little strange in the subdued lighting. I know some people say it's inefficient to produce an artificial day/night cycle on spaceships, but after millions of years of adapting to alternate darkness and light, it would be even more inefficient in terms of disoriented and disturbed crewmembers. The 24 hour cycle on the Enterprise is a bit tough on the handful of other races serving aboard but it's vice versa on ships where Humans are similarly outnumbered. Heck! The way my mind's wandering; it's the excitement. Let's get this over and done with.

Since there's no one about, I head back to the lift and wait. Before long, an empty car arrives. "Deck 17."

The lift deposits me near the observation gallery and I step into its darkened interior, feeling more confident now that I've got here unseen. Although the night shift is on duty, they'll be at work elsewhere and two-thirds of the ship's complement will be asleep - or, at least, in their rooms. Though you can't get up to much if you're sharing with

Noreen Hollis. My footsteps echo hollowly as I approach one of the great ports with its breathtaking view of blackness pinpointed by glaring white, red or blue diamonds. Hard-edged, all of them; there's no twinkle effect out here.

I stand at the window, unable to tear myself away. It's so beautiful. That's why I'm out here, the reason that has seemed so remote recently. But that thought in turn reminds me of the Captain's question to me and I turn away to do what I came here to do. Firstly, I make myself as comfortable as I can, cross legged on the floor. That's right... relax, let my arms lie across my knees. Now, close my eyes... Concentrate.

It's like a slipping away, really. How else can I describe it? I just... slip away, leave the outside behind: the hard floor, the hiss of the air conditioning, the subdued humming of the great engines which you only hear at dead of night and far away from people. Soon that's all gone and I'm just me - Marianne Raesdal - centre of the universe...

I am the centre and all extends from me, all life, all thought... emanates from me. I will stretch out... that's all I have to do. Just stretch... stretch... and touch a part of me... A part called 'James Kirk'. Now I draw on my memories of his mind, from the link with Spock...

Distance means nothing now, nothing. Although my body speeds away from Sigma Orionsis IV - farther every microsecond - my mind can reach it. If James is there... or if he is elsewhere... I can reach him. I can... bend... my mind through the space between space, like the Enterprise, not really moving in real space when its warp drive is engaged... So, too, my mind reaches to James Kirk... takes a short cut...

Hours... minutes... time ceases to be. There is only me... and James Kirk. If he is alive, I will reach him...

Aaaaa... There! Faint but...

Who are you? Captain... if it is you, answer...

Who... who are you? Oh, he's so weak, so faint...

Never mind, answer me. What is your name?

Kirk... James T. Kirk... Please, if you can... tell... tell Spock... not dead...

Where are you? Sigma Orionsis IV?

No... metal walls... Spaceship... I... I think we're... following.

Following? Following the Enterprise?

Yes...

He's ill... What have they been doing... Torture? Captain, hold on, I will tell the others. We'll rescue you. Just hold on to life.

I break the contact and drift slowly up to full consciousness. I knew something was wrong! The Captain still alive - it was a long shot but it paid off. She... or they, I think she wasn't alone... They must have planted a false memory in Spock's mind, to convince him the Captain was dead. All I don't understand yet is why. What's their motive for all this?

The gentle throb of the ship's engines fills my head, gradually dimming. At least there are no bright lights here. But, God I'm tired, even worse than last time. What is the time? I lift up my heavy arm, still clumsy with disassociation. That long? It'll be 'morning' soon: I'll be due on duty. But I'll have to see McCoy and Spock right away -

A faint sound: a footfall in the darkness behind me. Someone there! I half turn -

Pounding... my head. What... where am I? Groaning, who's that groaning... it's me. Everything's dark... except for the little lights dancing before my eyes: I always get those in darkness. Where am I? Hard surface under me... metal. A gentle vibration moves through it. So I'm still on the ship... or a ship. Let's try an experiment.

"Hello? Anyone there?"

Not the observation gallery: there's no echo. Let's try sitting up. Damn! My hands are tied behind me... My feet are free, though. Come on, sit up, Marianne.

Done it. What's this... I'm leaning against something... not the wall, it feels different. Try touching it... get my fingers in the right place... it's got a straight edge. Box?

Try to reason. It was nearly ship's day... I remember the chronometer. Either I've been out a long time - like after I helped Spock, or - or I'm in an area they don't bother to light till it's actually in use.

A storeroom? Or a cell on their spaceship?

Well, a storeroom would make sense... Whoever attacked me would have just had to bundle me in the lift and take me down a few decks. They probably had to go back on duty if they're on the same shift as me. But why? Why would anyone attack me... The woman or one of her cronies? If they have the ability to teleport? Of course, there is the first possibility - one of the crew...

Oh, no... no... Fits though, doesn't it? Ever since that link, I've had a feeling... something I've forgotten. Concentrate... I was going downwards, down, till I met a stray thought drifting down - or was it? Maybe it was coming back up. Maybe I was - made - to forget that. If so... Spock'll be coming back here to get rid of the evidence. Hell, I've got to get out of here, fast. Bonds first.

No good, can't budge them - a real professional job. Couldn't expect anything else, really. Right... what now? Blunder round in the dark, trying to find the door? He'll have locked it. No, I have to reach someone - call for help - but who? It'll have to be a Human; someone I know, to help the focus... Phil? He knows I'm sort of psychic and might be able to accept it - wait, though. McCoy! I've linked with him before - at the first medical: only lightly, to influence him a little, but I know enough to pinpoint him easily.

Come on then: Spock might be back any moment. Concentrate!

No good, that's just it. I can't relax, can't retreat inside myself. But I've got to - got -

Calm down. One step at a time. Think - when you first learned to distance-link. "Close your eyes, Marianne, and breathe slowly, deeply..." Grandma's voice soothing me, taking me into the trance state... Good... The room is sinking away from me. No, it's me who's sinking... deeper...

Doctor... Doctor McCoy can you hear me...?

"Damn it, where did I put those tapes... hnn?"

Doctor, listen. You must help me.

"Voice in my head... What the hell - ?"

Doctor, it's Marianne Raesdal. Please - help me! I'm in terrible trouble. I'm locked in a store room.

"Marianne? Where are you?"

In a store room - I don't know where exactly: I'm tied up and it's dark in here. Doctor, please get me out of here. It's Spock -

"Spock? I don't understand - "

His mind's been affected - whoever attacked him. And the Captain's alive -

"What? Jim - "

Doctor, please. Alert security, find Mr. Spock and get me out of here! I break contact and start to ease myself to my feet. Maybe I can find something in here that will wear away the cords.

Too late! A glimmer of light jabbing through the darkness. The door's opening. Quick, down on the floor again. Got to act unconscious, stall for time...

Light floods the room, red behind my closed eyelids. I can hear footfalls. Wait, they've stopped. It's all I can

do not to open my eyes and look...

"Get up!" It's Spock's voice but harsh, distorted. Urgh - pain. I roll away, curled in a ball, shielding my ribs. He kicked me -

"I said, get up!" A powerful hand grips my upper arm, hauling me to my feet. Groaning, I stand, held up by Spock's hand. After a few moments, I manage to straighten up to look at him, gritting my teeth against the pain.

Oh, no, he's completely mad: that's nothing rational looking out of his eyes. What is it though - the creature or woman or whatever it was. He smiles cruelly; I try to pull away.

"You're a little too curious, Ensign. We don't like that."

"Wh-who are you?" Got to keep it - them? - talking.

"We do not choose to answer, except to say that we are powerful beings of superior intellect. It's a pity that we have to destroy you - after all, you're the only other sentient being on this ship. But you could never be controlled for long, so..." Before I can react, I see Spock's hand come up -

Aaagh! I slide down the wall, groaning. There's blood in my mouth - I think one of my teeth has come loose. And that was just a slap... I cringe into the corner, trying to get away as Spock comes toward me, grinning. "Yes, Ensign, a great pity -"

"Please! I - I don't understand - Explain. Perhaps we can come to some arrangement -"

"I doubt it." But whatever's controlling Spock halts him.

"You know I'm telepathic - more like you than these Humans. You know from my link with Spock that I don't fit in here - that I'm not accepted."

"Your people do not interest us."

"But why are you doing this? I mean - why take over Spock, why kill the Captain -" That last was a risk: I'm hoping they don't know I actually reached him.

"It amuses us."

That voice - so full of gloating... It chills me. Shakily, I stand up, trying to ignore the bruises that make each movement agony. I have to support myself against the wall; I'm afraid I'll fall down again if I step away from it. "Amuses you? How?"

"These creatures - Humans - are beneath our contempt. They are psi-null - like animals." He smirks. "Beneath animals: even the beasts on our world have some vestige of ability."

Our world... I didn't sense any telepathic emanations from the animals on Sigma Orionsis IV. Maybe my guess was right: especially since 'Spock' discounted it. "H-how do you account for their technological achievements, then? All this - the ship - everything."

"They have a certain animal intelligence - nothing more. It makes them more entertaining to destroy."

Come on Doctor, where are you. "Is that what you're going to do - destroy them?"

"Oh, only a few. We shall pick them off, one by one, and enjoy their growing terror. And all the time, they will be unaware that their destroyer will be the most trusted among them." 'Spock' chuckles. "Your death will have to be the first - a pity, since we had planned otherwise."

"Wh-what were you going to do then?"

"We have already planted the seed so that when Humans were found, mind-slain, you would have been blamed. It would have been a most amusing scenario." So that's it: a nurse didn't tell Phil and the Lieutenant about me - 'Spock' did, and suitably adjusted their minds. It hadn't worked so well on Phil: I remember his hesitation. As I puzzle it over, I see Spock's face blank out - what - ?

HATE... MALICE... GLOATING EVIL... No, it's like a mallet... pounding... Abruptly, the pressure ceases. I collapse in the corner, leaning my head on my knees. It - they - attacked me but couldn't get through my barriers. I look up and see Spock's face twist in thwarted rage. "Well, no matter. A more primitive method is called for..." Spock advances. His hands reach out toward me, crooked into claws.

"N-no, keep away. No!" He only smiles... I can't even fight back with my hands tied - wait! A weapon -

Picture it! My mind like a spear - visualise it, sharp - needle-thin - push it at Spock - push it!

Done it! He's falling back, hands clutched to head. Push again - through him to her/it. Oh no, what have I done? Screaming, he drops to his knees, face contorted in terror. My attack dissipates as I lose concentration but it's too late anyway. "Spock... Spock, are you - " The door swishes open.

"Marianne!" McCoy is first through the door. He stops as he takes in the scene.

"Doctor!"

"What in - " As the security guards lunge through the door behind him, I recognise Phil as the first. He hurries over to me immediately, and begins to untie my wrists. I nearly fall into his arms - my legs have given way. Reaction, I expect.

"Phil, oh - " We both look over at McCoy, who is bending over Spock. The Vulcan is still on his knees, hunched over, face in his hands. As McCoy gently lays a hand on his shoulder and speaks his name, he keels over and lies like a puppet robbed of animation. I totter forward, Phil hovering at my elbow. "Doctor, is he - ?"

"He's alive - barely." The Doctor looks up at me, doubt in his eyes. I have to quell that - quickly.

"I can explain everything - in sickbay."

"Yes, yes of course." McCoy signals the other two security guards to pick up the limp body, then we file outside, Phil giving me a hand. Some more security men run up and halt at the sight of Spock. McCoy addresses one of them: "Better call off the search, Lieutenant." The man nods, still looking at Spock then, frowning, turns away to a wall intercom.

I sit back, mentally and physically drained. "Then you came in... That's it."

McCoy gets up from the desk and paces, almost to the door, then comes back and hitches his hip onto the corner of his desk, frowning down at me. "I find this hard to believe, Marianne. Jim... still alive?"

"I know... but he's in great danger. Whoever - or whatever's holding him prisoner - they look on Humans as playthings, something to torture for their own sadistic amusement." I rub at my neck: it's tense, and I can feel the beginnings of a headache settling in above my eyes. "When I hit back at them, they... they did something to Spock. Withdrew, maybe."

"And now he's like before. Nothing works, not even our most powerful stimulants. He's dying before my eyes again and I can only watch it."

He rubs a hand across his eyes and I can see the frustration and anxiety. He looks at me. "Can you do anything for him?"

I sigh: I'd been hoping he wouldn't ask. "I don't know, Doctor. Maybe they programmed him to die as soon as they withdrew. Or maybe they're still in there..."

"But you pulled him out of it before, Ensign - "

"No, I only thought I did. Spock was already coming out of it by then. He made me forget my doubts - I realise that now. It was too easy."

"But can't you do it for real?"

"Doctor, you just don't know what you're asking. I think he really is dying, this time. If I get stuck, I go with

him. I've never brought someone back out of that - "

McCoy's voice is gently persuasive. "You contacted the Captain over Lord knows how many light years. With strength like that, it shouldn't be a problem."

I shake my head, then wince at the pain in it. "That was an extension of a technique I'm trained in - that I've practiced since I was a kid. This is new. I just... I can't be sure that I'd even pull out of it, let alone bring Spock with me."

"Ensign, if you don't try, you said it yourself - Spock will die. You're his only chance!" The Doctor's blue eyes are fierce for a moment, then he subsides, turning away. "No, I shouldn't expect it - I'm asking too much. If only Jim Kirk was here - he's pulled Spock out of worse than this."

I get up, too edgy to sit still, and go to the door. "Doctor, I'm not refusing; I - well, I'm scared, if you must know."

"Marianne, it's too dangerous. Forget it; we'll try something else. There must be something I've overlooked."

I go out into the next room. The blonde nurse - Christine, she said her name was - sits by Spock's bedside, her attention on the panel above. She lets go of his hand, self consciously, as I enter, and smiles. I smile back, wondering what to do. Now that we're heading back to the planet, hoping that the aliens will bolt back there, perhaps we may get the Captain back in time. Perhaps it's as the Doctor said - he could bring Spock back. But he's ill too, and there's too many uncertainties. The aliens may have headed for their own world... though I don't think they've given up completely. This ship would be a rich prize for them and I don't think they'll be able to resist setting a trap for us.

I cross to the bedside, and Christine vacates the seat for me. Thanking her I sit, studying Spock's pale face. My tiredness sits heavily on my shoulders and my head aches, though the Doctor told me I should suffer no lasting effect from that blow on the head. I could wait till I'm rested - but is that an excuse to put this off?

Hell, he looks dead already. Just a slight rise and fall of his chest to show he's still hanging on. I reach out and grasp his hand like before, closing my eyes.

"Marianne, wait!" I hear McCoy's shout but everything is falling away -

Darkness. Absolute and for ever. Nothing lives here, nothing moves. Silence. I sink further down. Wait, a murmur. A woman's voice, whispering, "Die... die... die..." As I sink still further, it grows louder, like a recording in its mindless repetition; perhaps that's what it is. Why should she bother to hang around, after all, if she's put him on auto destruct?

Down... down... Seems like I've been here for ever. It's cold, empty, like the space between the warmth and friendliness of the island galaxies. Nothing... no sign of life... Everything: the logic, the memories - it all lies like dusty books on shelves in a forgotten library. All the life that animated it has gone.

The deepest levels. The region of the subconscious. Even this seems empty; Spock's consciousness has ebbed away past this level - No, I can see a red glow below me. Spock? A figure - an image of his physical form, bound by chains to a wall. He sags limply as if dead. As I drift down and settle by him, I see the sweat that beads his forehead. As I approach, they open and I see the pain of black despair. "Spock..."

"Leave... me... Die... must die..."

"No! Live - break the chains!"

"I... cannot..."

I stretch out my hands - I have hands here? - and touch the chains. Adamantine... I could never break them. "Spock, you must. You must live - don't give them the satisfaction of your death."

"Too weak..."

I grab the chains and pull - hard. The heavy links dig into my fingers, hurting them. Come on - again, again.

Useless. I sag against the wall, defeat like a bitterness in my mouth. Wait though - what about my other weapon? Concentrate -

The sharp pointed lance stabs out from me - this time actually visible, as a needle-fine ray of light. It touches the chains - they shatter, fall away! Spock tips forward, too weak to stand. I can't support him; he's too heavy. I grasp him by the arm. "Spock, come with me." With a great effort, he raises his head, then forces himself to his feet with some help from me. Together, we float upwards.

Up, up, our physical-seeming forms blurring into a shapeless cloud. Now we are pure mind once more - and this time, there is no kernel of thought separate from the rest to hide the woman's programming. I can see everything, now... how they made him believe the Captain dead, how they subtly controlled him so that he would remain himself except for his obedience to certain orders. And, finally, how they activated him, suppressing his own personality so that he became purely a tool. A tool for one of them - the strongest, I can see that much; at least, the strongest telepathically. They have other talents, too.

The light is close above our heads now. We rush toward it, then break the surface. This time, as I reach my body, I feel the world around me swaying. Much worse than last time...

"H-he'll be all right now, Doctor - " I disentangle my hand from Spock's, begin to rise.

"Marianne!" Strong hands catch me -

What... what happened? Urgh, my head... That's better, it's easing. I'm starting to remember. Sickbay... yes, I'm back in sickbay. Sit up... Oh, darn, I'm as weak as a kitten. Can only move my head... Hey, that's Spock sitting up in the next bed. Good, he's all right, then...

Hmm... that's better; the headache's gone. My head feels clearer too. The next bed is empty - wonder how many hours I've been out this time? McCoy - looking relieved - crosses to my bedside. "Doctor... where's Mr. Spock? What..."

"Just take it easy, Marianne. And don't worry about Spock. You get some rest."

"But the Captain - "

"We're still on our way back to Sigma Orionsis. Should be there in a few hours."

"But the Captain's not there! They're holding him on their ship - "

"Hold on a moment there, Marianne. Spock thinks it's likely that they headed straight back there as soon as they knew you'd saved him; it's the nearest planet and - "

"But why shouldn't they have headed straight back to their own planet? If they return to Sigma Orionsis, we'll have them outgunned."

"Well, Spock's got a better idea of their mentality than anyone - except you, possibly - and he reckons they won't give up this easily."

I nod, remembering that I'd thought of that earlier. "He could be right at that: they've still got the Captain as hostage and might think they could delay the ship there long enough for reinforcements to arrive." I push those worries to the back of my mind. "Am I well enough to get up now, Doctor?"

"That's what I'm here to find out. But I don't want you going back on duty just yet, in any case."

As I swing my legs off the diagnostic couch about ten minutes later, I look questioningly at the Doctor.

"Well, you're fit enough to be out of bed, Marianne. But I'd still like to keep you under observation for a day or so; you've had a pretty hectic time." I smile and nod. "If you go with Nurse Chapel, she'll get you something to wear."

As I'm changing into the comfortable tunic and trousers - borrowed from one of the other nurses, I suppose, since I'm too skinny to fill out Christine's clothes - she begins, hesitantly, "I'm glad you're feeling better. I - I'd just like to say, I do - do appreciate what you've done for Spock."

I look up, see her earnest face, and smile to lighten the moment. "That's all right, Chris. But, thanks. I was just pleased to be able to help." I carry on dressing; this provides food for thought, though. I didn't imagine those tears on her cheeks, did I? Something I never considered, what with all this business, that someone might actually love Spock. Though I imagine he's quite a nice person when he's not trying to kill you. The Captain's certainly fond of him.

I sit down on the nearest bed. "I suppose it's just a case of waiting now - till we get to the planet, I mean."

"The Doctor said that the Captain's still alive. That you found that out."

"Yes, but... well, he's weak, injured... and I think they'd been torturing him - probably mentally."

"Like the way they controlled Spock? It's horrible. Why should they do all this?"

"Well, according to the one I spoke to, it's because they enjoy it. They see us as... as the lowest form of animal life, I suppose - fair game for whatever they want to do to us." I see the worry in her eyes. "Look, try not to think about it. They won't control Spock again, I'm sure." I'm rewarded with a tentative smile. "I think I'll get some rest now - I want to be in good form for when we reach the planet."

Dozing on the bed, I hear voices in the outer room and reluctantly force myself awake. As I sit up, Spock and McCoy enter.

"We are now in orbit around Sigma Orionis IV," Spock states without preamble. "As I surmised, the alien craft is currently in orbit, though there are no lifeforms aboard. It seems probable that they are on the surface, probably in the area in which we first encountered them."

I blink, trying to take all this in.

"It will be sunrise in that region in one point zero three hours. I plan to beam down with a security team and endeavour to locate the Captain."

"And, er... You want to know if I'll volunteer?"

"Marianne," McCoy puts in, an anxious expression in his eyes. "After what you've been through, physically you're fine but it's your psychic ability that I'm worried about."

"It's been taxed, I'll admit but... well, I think I'm up to it. And if I don't go... They could do the same thing all over again." I start to climb out of bed. "My mental shields seem to be too strong for them but anyone else - Well, I don't think our chances of beating them will be very good if I don't go."

"Twenty-eight point five two percent to be exact - rising to a seventy-one point five percent success rate when you are added to the landing party."

I realise that I must look pretty stupid with my mouth hanging open and shut it; well, I already knew Vulcans were very literal minded and mathematical geniuses. McCoy's frowning but he makes no further objection: he knows as well as I do that I have to go.

Now comes the worst bit of all: the waiting. At least Spock can fill in the time with preparations but I have to sit here trying not to bite my nails. Twiddling my thumbs is what I've eventually settled for. Oh, I can't just sit here... Now I'm wearing away the floor with pacing. Then the door opens: it's McCoy. "Time to beam down, Marianne."

I practically race through the door, then halt, anxiously. "Oh, darn, I didn't change into my uniform - " I stop, realising what a stupid remark that was. Nerves. I grin - inanely, I'm sure - at the Doctor, who wishes me good luck then I'm out into the corridor and running for the transporter room.

As I enter, I see four security guards: one of them is Phil. I hurry over. "Phil! What are you doing here?"

"Well, they asked for volunteers - I got lucky." He frowns. "I thought this was security personnel only?"

"I - I can block out these people's mind probes, Phil. That's why I'm needed."

"So, even if the rest of us go under, you won't be affected? Well, I see the sense of that but... I'd rather you weren't on this assignment."

Coming from anyone else, I'd have taken that as a slur on my training and abilities. But I realise Phil's just concerned for my welfare. "I could say the same about you, Phil. But thanks for coming."

He shrugs, smiles. "When Spock told us the Captain's still alive - well, the chance to get him back and to have a crack at whatever killed José and Franz - I don't know anyone who didn't volunteer." He glances at my non-regulation outfit; seems to see it for the first time. "Hey, have you got a phaser? No? Wait right there." He disappears out of the door at a run. I wait anxiously but Spock hasn't shown up; there must be some kind of last moment hitch. Phil runs back through the door and hands me a phaser. "Here. Have that ready to stun the rest of us if we start acting funny - I wouldn't want anything to happen to you."

I take it, grinning like a fool and feeling myself blush. "Thanks - I wouldn't want that either."

Everyone snaps to attention as Spock enters, accompanied by McCoy who has a determined and triumphant gleam in his eye. So that's the reason for the delay: he must have been over-riding Spock's objections to his coming along. Of course; the Captain's a friend of his, too. At last we can step onto the pad and take our places. Butterflies are holding a convention in my stomach.

"Energise!"

Conscious thought has returned. I look about, the phaser gripped tightly in my hand. The air's fresh and fragrant like before, the grass underfoot is wet with dew and the sunlight is filtering through the leaves to our right but I'm too tense to enjoy all this like I did last time. The hum of a tricorder fills the clearing.

"Getting anything, Spock?" McCoy asks.

"Negative, Doctor. Ensign?"

I realise he means me and cautiously open a tiny chink in my mental barriers. Nothing... All right, let's try a probe... Still nothing. Reach out - what - quick! Slam! The gap shuts as a furious weight flies in and crashes against my shields.

"Marianne! Marianne, are you all right?"

Phil's holding me up. I recover and gently pull away. "Yes - they're here. They were ready - " I look at Spock. "You were right, sir; they've been expecting us."

"Did you manage to obtain a directional fix?"

"Over there." I point, a little shakily. "Would that be... the same direction as the place where they attacked you?"

Spock nods. Cautiously, we all cross the clearing and move off through the bushes.

"Sir, we'll have to keep a look out for more conventional weapons, too," I say tentatively. "The Captain must have been injured when you found him - there was blood on your shirt."

"Affirmative, Ensign. Unfortunately, I have no memory of the occurrence."

Quietly, without speaking, we continue on. I'm scared, I must admit - dead scared. This woman and her associates could be influencing the others even now. Maybe they're registering on the tricorders but the others can't see them. I glance at Spock's tricorder; no, I can't see any readings, either. What could it be - some type of illusion control? Too many factors to worry about - wait, a reading, behind us!

"Down! They're teleporters!"

Even as the others react to my yell, there's a scream of pain. I roll over onto my elbow, phaser in hand. There she is! Long dark hair - a dark green one-piece garment. But her face - split by a grin of savage exultation. Other phaser beams stab out - the security team's quicker than me - but they intersect at empty air. We scramble to our feet, looking around. McCoy kneels quickly by the fallen man - his hair's blond. I feel sick, seeing that, but - Phil's beside me. He's all right! A long bladed knife protrudes from the other man's back. McCoy stands, meeting Spock's questioning gaze, and shakes his head regretfully. The First Officer produces his communicator. As he finishes speaking, the body dissolves in the transporter effect.

"Ensign?"

I pull myself together. "They can teleport, sir. I - I don't know how she didn't register on the tricorder though. Either she was out of range then or - but I didn't think the attack she aimed at me came from very far off. I think they might have illusory ability of some kind."

"No sign of them now?" McCoy asks Spock, who is checking his tricorder.

"Negative. I suggest we continue on our original bearing."

Nervous as hell, I walk on with the others, occasionally glancing back at the security guards. What we really need here is a team from Mardrata-va. That woman and her friends are playing cat and mouse with us - she could be influencing the others at this very moment and I can't risk a probe to find out.

A clearing opens out before us. Suspiciously, we halt: there's an air of tension as if something is going to happen. A hiss of displaced air to our left - two figures. The woman - and a young man, almost a boy, golden haired and wearing a garment like hers, but brown. Both smile - nastily, gleatingly.

A cry of alarm. The phaser's being tugged from my hand - but no one's there. I swing round; see the others struggling like me. One phaser rips free, flies up and swings round in mid-air. A beam stabs out: a guard falls. I turn back and launch a mind probe - a combined barrier meets it, checks it. Beams of energy wildly dart out at the bushes or into the air as we fight to control our plunging phasers.

"Together, we outmatch you, girl," the woman says. The phaser in my hand is struggling like a live thing. Beside me, Phil lunges forward, reaching for the figures with bare hands. He screams - collapses - writhes - the woman laughs.

"Phil!" I start forward then - nothing in my mind but - Kill! KILL!

The boy's face distorts in surprised agony. He screams shrilly, and drops like a crumpled rag doll. The free phaser above us falls heavily like a stone; those in our hands cease to pull on them.

The boy's telekinetic!

Kiric! A mental cry of anguish that reverberates against my barriers. The woman kneels, cradling the boy in her arms, then looks up at me with such murderous hate - The fury that had possessed me and is only now subsiding, abruptly cools, leaving a chill fear. Then they both vanish with a pop of intruding air.

I run forward and bend over Phil who is already sitting up, rubbing his head. "God, what happened? It was agony - "

"Mind probe, Phil. You were lucky."

"The Ensign made a counter attack." Spock joins us. "A little unfortunate that you did not do so earlier."

Flushing, I straighten up. "I did, sir, but I couldn't get through their combined shield. When - when they attacked Ensign Surrey it - well, I got so mad it strengthened my attack. I - " I can't meet his eyes, I have to look away. "I think I killed that boy." We both know what that may mean for the Captain.

McCoy calls Spock back. "Barrows is all right, Spock. Lucky for him, that phaser was on stun."

Spock's communicator trills abruptly. "Mr. Spock, the alien craft is leaving orbit."

"Have you located the Captain aboard?"

"Negative, sir. All life form readings are erratic - we canna pin them down."

"Six to beam up, Mr. Scott. And place a tractor beam on that ship."

On board, the medical team is waiting as before; to speed the Captain to sickbay, we'd hoped, but that's not to be yet - and will it ever be? To kill with the mind - the worse thing a Casreem can do, the worst crime. What excuse to say I was not in my right mind? And what will that woman do to the Captain now? I've let them all down - Spock, McCoy, everyone.

No time to brood now, though. Even as McCoy and his staff spirit away the unconscious Barrows, and Phil, for a check up, Spock tersely orders me to accompany him. I almost have to run to keep up as he marches away to the turbo lift.

As the doors open on the bridge, I get my first look at it - a hive of efficient activity. The large viewscreen shows the tiny craft - it's sleek and spartan, carrying no identification marks. "Have you tried hailing them, Mr. Scott?"

"Aye, sir, but there's nary a response."

I wait to one side, forgotten, while Spock takes over the sensors. After a few moments, he comments, "Despite the confusion of life form readings, it should be possible to beam aboard."

Scott looks worriedly from Spock to the main screen and back again, but obviously knows better than to argue. Spock turns to me. "Would you accompany me, Ensign Raesdal?"

What can I do but nod?

We head down to the transporter room again, Spock keeping his thoughts very much to himself. No extra volunteers this time - fewer people to get killed. As we enter the transporter room, Spock goes to the wall intercom. "Spock to bridge. Tell Doctor McCoy to have an emergency medical team standing by for our return." For a moment I wonder - is he so edgy that he forgot that when we were on the bridge? No - he breaks contact before Lieutenant Uhura can fully acknowledge the order - he doesn't want to give McCoy a chance to talk himself onto this trip. We both step quickly into position: I check that the phaser I'm still holding is set on stun. I don't want to have to kill again...

The hold materialises around us - gloomy, unfamiliar. Spock moves quietly to the door before my eyes have had a chance to accustom themselves to the low lighting: then I notice the heavy chains attached to the walls, draped across long benches ranged in front of them. This must be where they keep the 'cargo'. Spock slides back the door and I join him. Outside, a narrow corridor with rounded ceiling is also dimly lit. The whine of straining engines comes to us - she must be attempting to break free of the tractor beam! Doesn't she realise that the strain will blow her engines? Spock moves stealthily off along the corridor so I follow.

The engine whine dies a little as we go toward the bow; now I can hear voices. Spock presumably heard them earlier.

"When we reach my home, you will wish I had killed you." The woman's voice!

"Please... give up now, before it's too late. You can't break free of the tractor beam - you'll only destroy this ship." The voice is weak but recognisably the Captain's. I glance sympathetically at the Vulcan but his face is stony.

"I will not be defeated by animals!" She sounds near breaking point.

Spock moves quietly onward and I follow, tip-toeing. When we finally halt, it's at the edge of an open hatchway. Through it, we can see panels with tell-tales glinting on and off: warning lights probably. But the Captain and the woman can't be seen from this angle.

"We'll wring you dry!" I jump nearly; her voice was so close! But she's talking to the Captain - still unaware of us. "Every fact about your Federation. When my people are finished, you will be an empty husk - less than an animal. We shall destroy your Federation."

"Why? We're not animals, we're people like yourselves. Why not join us instead?"

"Join you! I know about your other races from your mind and the Vulcan's. Most of them are psi-null by our standards. Only his race - and the ones who shared your planet - have any ability at all. We are infinitely superior to all of you."

"If that is so, why are you afraid to fall into our hands? Your ambush didn't work - the boy's dead - " His voice breaks off into harsh, choking breathing - she's suffocating him! Spock's hand on my arm makes me realise I'd been about to step through the hatchway.

"Why don't you come in, Mr. Spock?"

That voice freezes my blood. I watch Spock obey - he must be under her control again.

"Spock..." There's a note of despair in the Captain's voice. So she released him - maybe she has to concentrate on one at a time?

"No brave army at your back, this time? No, they'd be too vulnerable to my persuasion." A probe touches my mind shield and recoils. "But you've brought one companion. Do come and join us, girl."

My heart's in my boots. I step out from concealment, arm down by my side, to try and hide my phaser. The woman is standing by what looks like the ship's navigation console, a gun of unfamiliar design in her hand and pointed straight at the Captain's head. He lies back in a swivel chair which has been turned round to face us, his skin flushed with fever, his eyes sunken, and the skin around them dark. A pang of shock goes through me; how thin he is - he's lost a lot of weight since I last saw him, bronzed and healthy. How long ago was that - about six, seven days? Seems like years.

The woman stares at me, hatred in her dark eyes. Close up, she's about thirty years old, not beautiful but striking nevertheless. Lines around her mouth show she smiles a lot - but I've seen one of those smiles. The smile of someone who gloats in the pain and suffering of others. Spock is standing to her left, his face impassive, and behind him is another high-backed chair, also turned round toward me. This one holds a fair haired boy in a brown jumpsuit, his eyes closed. He looks asleep but I know he's dead.

"Your handiwork." She speaks calmly enough but her eyes radiate death. Somehow I find my own voice.

"I never meant to kill him - please, believe that."

"No? You sent such a kill-probe that even my strength couldn't block it. Your mistake, though. You might have handled Kiric - he was young, inexperienced. But you've got me instead. Whatever raw strength you have, you're still a primitive - and I'm not a youth on my first collection survey."

I shake my head, feeling a lump in my throat. "I was just trying to stop you - you were hurting a friend - maybe killing him - "

"So - you can't even control your own abilities? You are a primitive."

I bite back a retort. However I compare to her people, I'm still young by the standards of mine; I don't have all the refinements. And kill probes are totally alien to our way of thinking; we have no experience of such a thing. Still, my 'primitive' skills have been equal to her experience, so far. "You talk of killing but what about you? What did you do to the two guards who were with Spock and the Captain? And why have you tortured him? You're just a sadist - "

"We amuse ourselves, that's all. You interrupted a collection survey - we decided to teach you a lesson. Then we learned about the ship - the large number of specimens. A new, untapped source."

"What do you mean - collection survey?"

The woman smirks at my obvious stupidity. "I have explained already; we require psi-nulls for our amusements. My brother and I were assigned this system. Then your party arrived - an inconvenience - but one which we decided had possibilities. Two of us alone could not effect mass mind control, however."

"So you took Spock over - programmed him - you've told me that already. What did you hope to gain - even if Spock had fixed navigation we'd have fought him - fought you. Why didn't you run back to your own planet when you knew you'd lost?"

"Surely you can work that out for yourself? Since you uncovered our tool, we had to change our plan. He could no longer adjust the navigation computer as we had planned: but we knew you would come looking for the Captain. And we have already contacted our people - reinforcements will already be on their way." She smiles cruelly. "So you see - we have not lost. Our only misfortune was in not destroying you; I see that now. If Spock had killed you when he found you on the observation gallery, my brother would still be alive."

Lucky for me that they had to bring their 'amusements' into everything. But maybe I can shake her poise. "What did you think I was doing?"

"Doing? Trying to reach the Captain - you were in deep trance - "

"I did reach him."

"What? No, impossible. Even I couldn't reach a psi-null over that distance without previous bonding."

I imagine she means 'bonding' differently from the way others - Vulcans, for instance - would. She means tying another's will to hers in complete slavery. "I did it, primitive or not."

"You lie."

"No, she's telling the truth - she did reach me."

"Silence!" the woman's face is distorted by fury. She turns on Kirk.

Spock leaps across the control room, knocking her into the console with bruising force. For a moment, I just stand here, stupified, watching the struggle. Then I realise - when Spock moved out of hiding, he must have done so of his own free will, knowing she had the Captain at her mercy. His barriers are strong: she only caught him last time because he must have been shocked to find the Captain injured - a moment off his guard is all it would have taken.

I dive forward, then - duck! A wild blast of the woman's pistol just took out a section of wall behind me - not the outer hull, luckily for us. I get an arm round the Captain's shoulder - help him out of the chair. If he hadn't lost weight, I don't know if I could have moved him. He clutches his ribs, groaning but keeps pace as I take him toward the door. "Spock..."

"Captain, I'll get you to safety, first." I reach for the communicator on my belt, then freeze - I'm not in uniform. No communicator! Then I realise I can hear the warble of Spock's - the ship's trying to get through. "Captain, hang on to this - " I leave him by the door, find that Spock's subdued the woman. He has her arms twisted behind her as he flips open the box.

"Spock here."

"Thank goodness, Spock. Yon ship's about to blow - the readings have only just stabilised. We're ready to beam you aboard."

"Do so, Mr. Scott - we have the Captain." He motions me with his eyes to return and help the Captain. As I do so, I hear a 'pop' behind me - then the woman's in front of us. She teleported right out of his hands!

"Die!" She points Spock's phaser at us; I sense him leap toward us, but he's too late - Urgh!

I'm slammed into the outer hull, cushioning the Captain's fall. Another explosion shakes the control room. I can't move; my arms and legs are tangled up with those of the others. The woman shot us - didn't she? No, it must have been - the engines!

A sparkling begins around us. We're transporting -

As the transporter room materialises around us, McCoy rushes forward. "Jim!" Quickly, he and the other medics gently pick up the Captain and lay him on the medical trolley. He's semi-conscious - just moaning Spock's name over and over. I hope he hasn't been badly hurt in the blast just now. I look round; Spock's looking a little shaken. The woman's behind me - I start to cry a warning, then realise that she hasn't got the phaser: must have dropped it. Blood - red, like my own - snakes down one side of her face from an ugly looking gash on her temple. She gazes round, seemingly dazed, then suddenly realises where she is.

"No... Kiric - "

She disappeared!

"Spock, the woman - she's gone - "

Spock picks himself up and weaves around McCoy and the bewildered medical staff who are just wheeling the Captain out of the room. He reaches the controls and takes them from the Lieutenant on duty. I hurriedly scramble off the pad and join him. I can see from the way he's switching and re-routing that he's having trouble.

"That's how it was until a moment ago, sir," the Lieutenant is saying. "No clear reading."

"Spock, it must be her! She's got the power of illusion creation but if we concentrate - "

"Yes." Spock ceases to manipulate the controls and closes his eyes. I try it myself: after all, Casreem can sometimes see through Tithoniél illusions. They don't exactly work on the same frequency as telepathic sendings which is why Tithoniél can't transmit their thoughts, though they can make whole groups of people perceive something that isn't really there. Or fail to perceive something that is - like this case. But if she was transmitting on the illusion frequency the whole time - the power she must have.

Wait... I think I'm getting it - no, something -

Vedasi, avenge us! Enemy psi bulls called Humans. Ship called Enterprise - and they have help from -

Blackness... Nothing.

I stagger, gripping the edge of the console. Dially, I sense a supporting arm around me and hear the warble of the intercom. Uhura's voice says, "The alien ship just exploded, sir."

"Ensign, are you all right?" It's the Lieutenant's voice. I open my eyes and see that Spock is eyeing me curiously.

"You screamed," he says, flatly.

"I - I felt her death - didn't you? And what she said - "

"Negative." I sense that he doesn't want to discuss this in front of the Lieutenant.

"Shall we... go to sickbay?" I suggest. He nods and I start to follow. "Thanks, Lieutenant. I'll be all right now."

When we reach sickbay, there's no sign of McCoy and the others. Spock asks a nurse, who tells him they're in surgery with the Captain: apparently, he's got cracked ribs, torn ligaments and a few other injuries. The blood on Spock's shirt was probably from cuts criss-crossing the Captain's chest: probably another instance of those people's sadism. We go into the office where we'll be out of the way. I sink into a chair with relief, my legs still weak.

"Well, Ensign?"

Doesn't give much quarter to other people's tiredness, does he? "Before - before the ship blew up, the woman made a sending... directed at her people, I think." I repeat the message I intercepted. "She could have teleported to the Enterprise or the planet but she stayed. She chose to die with her brother."

"Illogical."

I stare at Spock, feeling I could kick him. "I don't think she was very rational at that moment, sir. After all, she did have a head injury." He gives no indication of having recognised my bad-tempered sarcasm. "But, if they picked up that sending, they'll come looking for us. She said they're already on their way. And with their powers..."

Spock crosses to the desk intercom and contacts the bridge, ordering them to keep alert for signs of ships on the long range sensors. Then he returns to the cross-examination. "Do you judge that likely, Ensign? Did the transmission give some indication of their present location?"

"No, there's no telling how far a telepath can transmit in those circumstances - desperate, and to people she has

close mental ties with. After all, I reached the Captain and I only really knew him from my link with you." I realise I've just admitted to remembering things from our melds and flush with embarrassment but Spock seems to overlook it.

"I find it curious that a species with such developed psychic abilities, should still possess subspace radio equipment aboard their vessel."

"Huh? They had conventional communications, you mean?" Doesn't miss a trick, does he? I mean, all that life-and-death stuff going on and he finds time to give the ship's controls the once over. "Well, that's not so odd really. Normally, we don't communicate telepathically over long distances if other means are available - it's not laziness, it's the fact that it takes a deep trance and that's not always practical - or safe."

"If you recall the woman's exact words, she said that they had already contacted their people and that 'reinforcements will be already on their way'. A curious choice of words, don't you think, Ensign, unless they had merely sent a subspace message and had not yet received a reply. In which case, their people would have dispatched help as soon as receiving their message but their reply would not yet have reached this far."

"So those ships could be days... weeks away, even. How the hell did she expect to keep us here till they arrived?"

"I can, of course, only speculate, but if they had taken over the other members of the landing party and killed us, they could have been taken aboard as 'prisoners' and furthered their aims by crippling the ship in some way."

"Yes... yes of course. But they could have got that sending from her, in which case... They'll either keep on coming, hell-bent on revenge or, if they've got more sense, they'll withdraw... find out more about Humans before they decide to take us on."

Spock nods. "That would, of course, be the logical course of action, though observation of the two we have encountered so far has shown a decided lack of logical thought patterns - the way they chose to ambush us, for instance."

"Yes, they knew we were dangerous and yet - they couldn't break out of old habits. They still had to taunt us, amuse themselves... That was their mistake."

"Does the name Vendasi mean anything to you, Ensign?"

Oh, hell, I'd been hoping he wouldn't get around to that. I look down, studying my clasped hands. "Well, it - it sounds similar to a Mardrata word, vendsi. But that just means big - large - that's all. Just a coincidence, I suppose."

"I require you to submit a full report, Ensign, including full details of your telepathic contact with the aliens. Then you may report to sickbay."

I nod and stand up, realising that I've been dismissed. Hell, I'm tired. Dragging my feet, I set off back to my cabin.

Well, after two days rest, I'm finally feeling more like my old self. I'm back on duty at last and everything's more or less back to normal - except for Phil. He's still friendly when he sees me in the corridor, but he doesn't drop by at my rec room for coffee breaks anymore and he hasn't suggested meeting up in our off duty hours so I guess that's it. Can't say I blame him really - after all, it's one thing knowing that a person is psychic, quite another to realise that she can kill with her mind.

Despite my words to Spock and discounting the possibility in my report, doubt still haunts me. The Mardrata did have an origin, though we no longer remember where or why we left it to come to Earth. Maybe there were... others... who went elsewhere - or maybe some remained behind on our first home? People who still possess the five talents as we once all possessed them before we fragmented into clans. Even then, we each had one talent more developed, more powerful than the others - the boy's telekinesis, the unnamed woman's telepathy? I wonder.

What else has happened? Well, we left Sigaa Orionsis IV finally when there was still no sign of the reinforcements. And the Captain's on the mend. He'd developed an infection in those cuts on his chest which had weakened him still further but the Doctor's cleared that up and patched up the rest of his injuries. Bulletins say he'll be back on duty in a few days.

That's more or less it: except I haven't yet submitted a report to Mardrata-va about what I did. I'll have to do it, of course, and I expect there'll be a trial, but I'll ask the Captain for some help when he's better. It's such a rare crime that most of Casreem will want to be in on the prosecution if they decide there's cause for one. The old penalties are still on the books, I believe - death or banishment. I don't know which seems worse: banishment now would mean never going to Mardrata-va, never living with my own people again. Compared to that my other problem - wondering about my vocation in Starfleet - pales to insignificance. Of course, if I am banished, then my career will be of supreme importance, but somehow, I can't work up any enthusiasm over that. I had always hoped to maintain an anonymity - to appear to be an ordinary human being. But I've had that - on this ship, anyway.

In a way, I envy Spock: he can simply be himself because he's obviously alien, physically different, not outwardly indistinguishable from Human like me. But I wonder if he's so lucky, after all, not free to show his feelings. I can at least do that even if I get them bruised in the process.

Time will tell if I stick it out on the Enterprise. All I know is, I've got a nasty foreboding that Vendasi - whoever or whatever that is - will demand a reckoning...



2 A LINK REFORGED

Arwen Tithoniél lay back in her chair and stretched out her legs under the table. "That was excellent, gentlemen." A few crumbs littered their plates: all that remained of a rich and varied meal.

With an impish grin, Kirk remarked, "There was nothing wrong with your appetite, Ambassador."

Arwen wrinkled her nose. "Jim, when you've spent a whole winter in a park, keeping body and soul together with vita-protein and chocolate bars, you appreciate food when you get it."

"I hope you eat better than that these days, Arwen," McCoy put in.

"Naturally, Bones: I eat on starships! Speaking of which, did I tell you I'm glad to be back on this particular taxi?"

Kirk chuckled, recalling a remark he had made when Arwen had last been aboard, about there being other starships to act as her taxi. "How have things been going with your round-up?"

"Oh, very well, Jim. I'm two-thirds through that list I showed you - remember? It's been pretty easy; everyone packed and ready by the time I turn up. All I've had to do is make sure they settle in properly on the ships that take them to their dropping-off points. That's been the only grumble, really - some of them have had to transfer two or three times before they got to Mardrata-va."

Kirk set down his wine glass. "I know how they feel, Arwen, but the Fleet's had to fit them in with other official business. No one likes it but we can't afford to tie up one ship for the time it'd take to collect everyone."

Arwen shrugged. "I do appreciate that, Jim. But it's only natural that people want to get to Mardrata-va as soon as they can. And no one likes too much upheaval; especially us stick-in-the-mud colonials."

"You're anything but that," McCoy drawled, raising his glass. "But here's mud in your eye."

"Cheers," Arwen agreed. They all drank in silence for a moment. "Well, how have things been here since I last saw you all?" She looked questioningly at the four men. "There have been some changes I can see - since Mr. Scott's been let in on the secret." She smiled teasingly at the Chief Engineer.

"It's Scotty, lass. But you're right; it was after that business at Sigma Orionsis IV." He looked at the Captain, inviting him to explain. Kirk, in turn, glanced at his First Officer who had said little all evening, but saw he would have to deal with this himself.

"We had a little trouble a couple of months back - as Scotty says, it was on Sigma Orionsis IV." He tapped his ribs lightly. "To tell the truth, I cracked some more of these."

Arwen recalled Kirk's injuries on Vulcan. "How did you manage it this time, Jim?"

"Well... in an indirect way, it involves you. One of your people - Casreem not Tithoniél - is currently serving aboard. She came to us shortly after you and the other ambassadors were here."

"Really? I didn't know there were any Mardrata in the service. But you still haven't told me how you cracked your ribs - you didn't challenge her to a bout of karate in the gym?"

Kirk, who had been enjoying his build up of suspense, conceded defeat. "Nothing that exciting, I'm afraid." Briefly, he outlined the story of the Enterprise's encounter with two hostile, psychically gifted individuals.

"And you didn't find out where they came from?"

"No, after we all beamed back aboard, the woman teleported back to her ship. She sent a telepathic message - to her people, presumably - and then the ship exploded. We couldn't get a clear fix to beam her back in time - she projected something like one of your illusions, that confused the readings."

Arwen was frowning. "If you know she sent a message, I take it that someone picked it up?"

"Ensign Raesdal, the Mardratan crew member," Spock supplied. "The message was: 'Vendasi, avenge us. Enemy psi-nulls called Humans. Ship called Enterprise - and they have help from - ' Then the ship exploded."

"Sounds like she was about to tell them about the Mardrata." Arwen felt a curious but deep seated relief that the message had been interrupted. "Vendasi... a name, I suppose. Someone she knew."

"Ensign Raesdal commented on it's superficial resemblance to 'vendsi' - the Mardratan for large."

Mardrata nodded. "Hmm... but wouldn't the rest of the message have been in the woman's own language too? Vendasi's just a name, surely..." She sat forward, leaning her elbows on the table, her eyes narrowing. "Unless... I'm no telepath: I can't count the quarter Casreem on my Dad's side - it's never come out in me... Telepathy, though; thoughts - there's no language barrier in mind contact, is there?" She looked questioningly at the Vulcan.

"That is so," he agreed. "Personal names - or words non-translatable into the recipient's own language - would be the only exceptions."

Arwen turned to Kirk. "I'd like a word with the Ensign, if that's all right with you, Jim."

The Captain smiled. "Fine: I'll ask her to come to your cabin in the morning."

"Well, it's pretty late, gentlemen, so if you don't mind, I'll get some shut eye."

"Of course." Kirk and the other three courteously stood as the Tithoniél ambassador pushed back her chair. "I'll escort you to your cabin."

"Afraid I might get lost, Jim?" she asked with an arched eyebrow. Before he could react, she turned to the others. "Goodnight, Spock, Bones, Scotty." Kirk followed her out, conscious of his Chief Surgeon's grin.

Arwen set off along the dimly lit corridor at a brisk pace, kicking out her long, boldly checked dress. Kirk reflected that he had only once seen her in something else - her shimmering green stage outfit when she had belonged to Thelan's troupe of entertainers. She must have a whole wardrobe of those dresses, he thought.

"You know, Jim, the more I think about what you've just told me, the less I like it."

Kirk shook his head. "If I'd known it would worry you, I wouldn't have mentioned it - " He stopped speaking as Arwen laid a hand on his arm, then halted, facing her. In the half-light, her expression was deeply concerned.

"No, Jim, you did right to tell me. I'm Tithoniél chief, remember - one of only four chiefs of all Mardrata. That's a big responsibility. If these people - whoever they are - are going to come gunning for us, I have to know about it."

"Arwen," Kirk interposed gently. "I don't think there's any danger of that - "

"Only because that woman didn't have time to complete her message. It wouldn't take them long to get the rest if

they turned up here, would it? Even if Spock could stand up against a whole gang of them, you and Bones - and now Scotty - aren't mindshielded. From what you've told me, they've got mental torture down to a fine art." She turned half away, clenching her fists. "The Casreem aren't skilled in that. They could manage a group shield - maybe enough to protect the rest of us - but they couldn't shield all the psi-nulls in the Federation."

"I don't believe it will come to that, Arwen."

"Don't be so sure, Jim: who knows how many there are of them? If they go collecting psi-nulls for their 'entertainment', they could be snatching Federation citizens right now. Who'd be any the wiser?" She sighed, pushing back her long ginger hair. "Sorry - I think I just chewed you out, Jim. And I didn't mean to sound selfish, either: I wasn't just thinking of Mardratans."

"I know. And you didn't chew me out." Seeing her contrite expression, he couldn't resist adding, mischievously, "Well, I deserved it, anyway."

Arwen chuckled, her forebodings temporarily forgotten. "It's all true what they say about you, Jim - you're a grade A charmer."

By mutual consent, they continued along the corridor.

"I'm sorry. I've ruined a pleasant evening by being so gloomy."

"Not at all," Kirk reassured her. "We enjoy having you aboard - you're our favourite ambassador."

"Flattery gets you precisely nowhere, Jim. But I enjoy being here, too: you always cut me down to size if I get too bigheaded." They halted outside Arwen's door and she moved forward, then paused in the open doorway. "Goodnight, Jim." Impulsively, she kissed him on the cheek, then went inside.

For a long moment, Kirk stared, bemused, at the closed door. Then, touching his fingers to his cheek and smiling, he headed away for his own cabin.

"And that's everything. Every detail you can remember?"

"Y-yes, that's everything."

Arwen switched off the recording and extracted the bright square of plastic. She weighed it in the palm of her hand, thoughtfully. "I still think this would come better if you sent it."

"N-no, I - " Marianne studied the hands clasped together in her lap. "I've tried and tried - I've erased dozens of recordings. I've even tried printing it out on plasti-sheets."

"Look... Marianne, I don't think Kleddo will take a harsh view of this - "

Marianne jerked up her head, staring at Arwen with bright brimming eyes. "Not take a harsh view? Arwen, I killed that boy - with my mind. There isn't a worse crime in Casreem law!"

Arwen stood up and rounded the table to sit on the bed beside Marianne. She put an arm round her, comfortingly. "This isn't... usual, is it? I think Kleddo will be more concerned with those people - the threat they pose to everyone. Mardrata and psi-nulls alike."

Marianne sighed unsteadily, holding back tears. "I know you're right. That's why I tried to make that tape. I don't think Starfleet's taking it seriously enough. They've put Sigma Orionsis off-limits but I don't know if they've bothered to inform Mardrata-va. My fault in a way - I discounted the point about 'Vendasi' so there's no real reason why they should tell the Mardrata."

"Well... I haven't heard about it till now but that doesn't prove much - the way I move around they have trouble keeping up with me." She considered the tape in her hand. "If you like, I'll make a tape myself - put your case for you - and get it sent off priority."

"Can you do that?"

"Well, ambassador status has some privileges. Try not to worry - I'm sure Kledo won't take it any further."

Marianne nodded, keeping her head down. Arwen removed her arm from the young woman's shoulders. "If you're... feeling up to it, I think we ought to discuss the implications. It'll help me get my thoughts in order."

"I don't mind."

"It's about Vendasi, primarily. I've been wondering about it since Spock told me last night. But I'm not a telepath - "

"Normally a word like that - if it's not a name, well... it could be one with no direct meaning - no exact equivalent," Marianne hesitantly began. Arwen sensed her relaxing as focused her attention on a problem less personal.

"Hmm... that's what I told Jim and the others - the Captain," she explained. "But it doesn't have to be an alien concept, does it? Couldn't it be - well, for argument's sake - that there's been a shift in meaning - not too drastic but enough?"

Marianne stared. "Y-yes, I think so. Oh, do you think - " She stopped, choked by sudden fear.

"Go on... spit it out."

Marianne stared then giggled nervously at the crude analogy. "Well... ever since it happened, I've thought and thought about it. Suppose they... they should be related to us somehow?"

"Other colonies... or even the original one? Yes, it's occurred to me, too. Funny, I thought I'd jump for joy if we found the people we came from, but now... The ones you met were monsters, weren't they?"

Marianne stood up, wringing her hands. "It's... it's what the Humans think of us, anyway. If these people are related to us, it'll make things ten times worse."

"Monsters - us? Marianne, where did you get that idea - ?"

The dark haired woman spun round, her violet eyes startling in her pale face. Tears glinted on her cheeks. "But it's true. It's what they think of me - " Abruptly, she bolted for the door.

"Wait! Marianne!" Arwen lunged after her, catching her feet in her long dress. She crashed to the floor. Horrified, Marianne stopped, then rushed back to Arwen as she picked herself up.

"Arwen, I - I'm so sorry - "

"Don't be; I'm just clumsy." Arwen rubbed her elbow and swore. She looked up at Marianne's distraught face. "Sit down, Marianne - please. I think we should talk." The other young woman flopped down onto the bed, a picture of utter dejection. "Want to tell me about it?" Arwen coaxed, getting up and walking over.

"Yes, but... If you don't mind, I'd prefer to... show you. It... it's how we relieved problems at home - easier than talking them out. There's less misunderstanding."

"All right, but I must warn you - I've never linked with anyone before. I don't know what to do."

"It's best if you lie down - just make yourself comfortable and try to relax." Marianne got up as Arwen complied, then sat down beside her. "Now try to empty your mind as much as possible. I'll show you my thoughts without encroaching on yours."

Arwen nodded and closed her eyes. In moments, her mind began to fill with images: a coherent story unfolded for her.

A while later, she opened her eyes and blinked, feeling slightly disoriented. "You have had a rough time..."

Marianne sighed. "You can see now..."

"Yes, though why the Captain should - Are you sure it's not just... well, maybe misinterpreting his attitude?" She held her hands up to placate Marianne's look of outrage. "No, wait, hear me out. I gave him a lot to put up with when I first met him, believe me. And I never noticed anything like what you've told me. I'll admit he was wary of me

at first, but now he's come to accept me. I can't believe he'd be prejudiced like that."

"Perhaps... perhaps it's because he's not stuck with you - you're not part of his crew." Marianne shrugged, smiling wanly. "Telepathy's different, anyway - they're all afraid I've got nothing better to do than read their minds. I don't blame Phil, not really - not after I killed that boy. I know he just couldn't cope with that. But it's me, too - I don't think I can fit in with Humans, somehow." She looked away. "I envy you, Arwen."

Arwen shook her head, emphatically. "You shouldn't. It's just luck; there are plenty of Humans who can't fit in with Humans either."

"Hmm, I suppose you're right," Marianne agreed, but did not look any happier.

"Look, Marianne, if you're really this unhappy - hell, that's stupid, I know you are - well, why not ask for a transfer? Then if you're as fed up with your next ship... Where were you before this, anyway?"

"The Potemkin. It was just a temporary posting - I was only there about four months. Before that, I was cooling my heels on a starbase, waiting for the ship to turn up - they'd been diverted to sort out some Klingon trouble. Just my luck, eh - two months hanging round doing nothing."

"And how was that - the Potemkin, I mean?"

Marianne shrugged. "Well... it was all right. There was such a lot to get used to, I really didn't give much thought to making friends. Not real friends 'cos I knew I'd be moved soon anyway." She smiled again, wistfully. "Not that I had many friends at the Academy - though I think I got on better with non-Humans. Well, I'll stick it out here for a few months, like you said. I really think I ought to in case we run into some more of those... people." She studied her clasped hands. "I... I don't want you to think I'm always like this - such a useless wet rag. It's only since - since Sigma Orionsis that I just... well, I think I'm falling to pieces, cracking up."

"Marianne, look... you'll be getting a couple of days shore leave while I clear up my official business. Once that's out of the way, I'd like to see you down there - that's if you'd like."

Marianne had raised her eyes hopefully. "I'd like that very much, Arwen. I - " She suddenly threw her arms around Arwen who, after a moment's surprise, returned her fierce hug. "I'm sorry, I'm just an emotional fool."

"No, you're not - you just need some friends, that's all. Unlike an antisocial pariah like me. Now - don't worry. I'll see Kledo gets this tape of yours as soon as I can. We'll take this seriously even if Starfleet won't."

"Thanks, Arwen - for everything. I - I'd better get back on duty now."



Arwen dusted off her hat, flexed the brim and turned it around in her hands, deep in thought.

"So, what do you know about him, Arwen?"

Kirk's voice brought her back to the present. "Hmm? Oh, well, Jim, I don't rightly know. He's third generation colonist, apparently, who never married - the rest of his family have died or else moved to other colonies. We sent him the info on the Mardrata-va option but he didn't answer - didn't vote."

"Isn't it possible that he died in the interim?"

"Well, yes, but the planetary government didn't seem to think so when they supplied his address."

"Well, you've given us the chance for a couple of days shore leave, anyway," Kirk pointed out, smiling.

"And knowing you, Jim, you probably deserve it," Arwen said, grinning. A signal from Kirk's intercom prevented his reply. As he activated the screen, it lit up with Uhura's image.

"We're now in orbit around Antigone, sir. We'll be over the beam down point in approximately one minute."

"Thank you, Lieutenant."

Arwen stood up. "Well, no rest for the wicked." She planted the green floppy hat on the back of her head and

picked up her bag.

"I'll walk you down there," Kirk offered. As they made their way along the corridor, he said, "I didn't ask you; how did you get along with Ensign Raesdal?"

"Fine, Jim. I took the liberty of getting Lieutenant Uhura to transmit the recording of Marianne's account to Kledo - well, to Starfleet to forward on to him. Who knows when he'll get it - hope that's all right with you?" She looked questioningly at him.

"Of course, Arwen. You don't have to ask - it goes with the job."

"Jim, remind me to talk to you about Ensign Raesdal when I get back, hmm?"

The door of the transporter room slid open in front of them. Arwen advanced to the transporter pad. "See you soon, Jim - and remember - don't work too hard!"

Kirk nodded, smiling. "Good luck, Arwen. Energise, Lieutenant." As the sparkling form faded from the pad, he headed back to his cabin, to make a really determined onslaught on the pile of reports on his desk.

Some time later, his door buzzer signalled. Suppressing a sigh, he laid down his stylus. "Come."

The door slid back and McCoy entered, casually attired in blue shirt and trousers. He stopped to eye the neat pile of reports on Kirk's left. The Captain smiled guiltily. "All right Bones, I know. I promised I'd tear myself away from this desk - and I will. Just a few more reports - " He lifted another tape from the small pile on his right.

McCoy advanced to the desk, plucked the tape from Kirk's unresisting hand and set it firmly back on the right hand pile. "I'm not taking no for an answer, Jim. Shore leave - and that's the Doctor's orders."

Kirk threw up his hands in a gesture of capitulation. "All right, Bones, you win. Just let me get changed." As he headed into the sleeping quarters, McCoy called after him.

"Sure we can't get Spock to come?"

Kirk paused, smiling ruefully. "Not this time, Bones. He's happier minding the store."

Arwen had materialised in one corner of a grassy square bordered with trees. At first, she had been content to merely stand, sniffing the perfume scented air. It was a pleasant change to have arrived during a planet's summer. Then she recollected her mission and, after consulting her map, had oriented herself with her surroundings and set off.

The route she had chosen took her along wide, tree-lined avenues. As she turned into the road where her quarry lived, she checked the numbers of the houses she passed. All of the dwellings were prosperous but without being too ostentatious: the old man had obviously done quite well for himself.

Yes, here it was: a bit shabbier than the rest. Feeling just a little apprehensive, she walked up the path and pressed the door buzzer. A small vid screen mounted just above her head hummed into life almost instantly, though it showed no picture. Then a crotchety old voice said, "Who is it? Stand back further - where I can see you."

Swallowing, she complied, taking off her hat. "I'm Arwen Tithoniél. I'm here to see Levi Telkma, about Mardrata-va."

"In that get up? Go away."

"Levi - it is Levi, isn't it? Don't you want to go to Mardrata-va?" A thought struck her. "You did get the papers that were sent out?"

"I got them, all right. You don't fool me - I know it's all a con trick. Somehow you've found out about us. You've come to track us down - lock us away - "

"Levi - " Arwen curbed her frustration. "I'm not Human - I'm Mardratan, like you - "

"You don't fool me. You want to ship us all off someplace in a leaky spaceship that'll blow up halfway to

nowhere. I know Human history, girl - I know what you people have always done to each other, so what chance do we have? That's what the Nazis told their victims, isn't it - resettlement camps? Well, you don't get me on that one."

"But - I can prove it. Look, I'll show you an illusion - "

"Camera trickery. You must think I was born yesterday."

Growing more exasperated and bewildered by the moment, Arwen struggled to keep her temper. "I'll make any illusion you care to name, Levi - "

"They can do anything with cameras these days," the angry voice objected.

"Well - watch me from a window then!" Arwen shouted.

Clunk! The link went dead. Arwen's heart sank. "Oh no, I've really done it now..."

A wavering voice abruptly called out from the side of the house. "Well, come round here, then."

Quickly, Arwen plunged through the bushes and down the side of the house. She stopped dead, leaves and twigs in her ginger hair, at the sight that confronted her from a ground floor window. Peering out of a small gap was a wrinkled face topped by a wiry thatch of iron grey hair. Bright blue eyes watched her suspiciously.

"That's close enough."

Arwen merely shrugged, and rammed her hat back on her head. She concentrated and a bush, decked with translucent pink roses, began to grow up between her feet.

"Hang that - I could do that, girl! If you're chief of Tithoniél and can't manage anything better than that - "

Arwen banished the illusion. Sweetly, she said, "I was thinking of your neighbours, old man."

"If you're on the level, I won't be staying here so I don't care what they think. Never do anyway. No, I want to see some real stuff - something that I know hasn't been turned out by a hold-image gadget up your sleeve."

Arwen folded her arms, eyeing him levelly. "Do you want me to take this off?"

"No, no, no." The old man waved a hand impatiently. "No, you can make something to my order - something you couldn't have prepared beforehand." Without a break, he added, "Shenike shemda u Linalin Tithoniél."

Arwen lifted her eyebrows, then concentrated again. In moments, the image of a tall, willowy woman with long black hair, began to form on the path beside her. The shape grew more solid with each second. The woman's face became clear: it was not beautiful but had instead a strength of character in the clear grey eyes, the lines around the mouth. Looking at her, any bystander could have discerned that, animated, she would become beautiful. She wore the long black dress and white apron of a seventeenth century working class woman.

The old man stared at the illusion without blinking. Arwen could tell that he was using his mind shift ability to test it. At last, he nodded. "It's a good one - good and strong. It takes a lot to see through it." There was grudging admiration in his voice. "You're chief, right enough. Come round to the front door and I'll let you in."

Arwen smiled as she was once again alone on the path.

When she reached the front door, it was already open, Levi, a tall man but slightly stooped with age, standing awkwardly in the hall. She doffed her hat and smiled again to set him at his ease as she stepped inside and closed the door.

"In here," he said, going through another doorway. Arwen followed and took the seat he offered her. While he went into the kitchen to dial up two coffees, she looked round at the comfortable, slightly untidy lounge with its worn furniture and shelves of old and faded books. The walls and tops of various cabinets displayed images of people of all ages - Levi's family, Arwen realised. Some were in the form of the modern three dimensional cubes, but most were the two dimensional flat images - photographs - mostly only used for official documents, and family portraits on the more conservative colony worlds. As her eyes roamed around the room, she noticed a painting in a small frame - Linalin, identical to Arwen's illusion. In the background, a gallows tree appeared, grim reminder of the fate from which this woman's courage and intelligence had rescued the New England Tithoniél community.

Levi returned, handing her a cup of coffee. She knew he had seen her looking at the painting and decided a direct approach was best. "Why Linalin?" Before answering, he seated himself in the other armchair.

"Why not?" he demanded a little brusquely, then seemed to relent. "You'll have to make allowances for me; I don't get much company these days. As for why I asked you to weave Linalin's image, well... She's one of the greatest chiefs we've ever had and - well, she's an ancestor of mine."

Arwen frowned, sipping her coffee. "But your surname's Telkaa; shouldn't it be Siara like hers?" She referred to the Mardrata custom of marriage, of taking the name of the family with greater status. Siara had always been a high status family and - at least since Linalin's time - the highest, being the family of chieftains.

"Oh, something happened..." Levi stared at the floor. "About 1814, my how-many-greats-grandfather married a Human woman. Of course, that was before things got more tolerant and so he was disowned, barred from using the Siara name. Later on, after things eased from the twentieth century on, one of his descendants married back in - to the Telkaa family." He shrugged and sipped at his coffee. Arwen realised that the issue of his Human blood was a sore point, and probably explained a lot of his earlier hostility, but she knew also that he had felt obliged to answer her question because of the loyalty all Tithoniél owed to their chief. She determined to ease things for him however she could.

"We're glad to have you aboard, Levi. Here." She rummaged in her shoulder bag for the pictures and documents that she had brought with her. "This is what Mardrata-va looks like. And the settlement - it's not finished yet, of course -"

For the next hour, they poured over the material together, and Arwen took Levi clause by clause through a copy of the document that had granted legal title of Mardrata-va to the Mardrata, knowing he would still be very suspicious of the Humans' generosity. Finally, she started to fold the things away. Levi hadn't said much, except to ask a few questions, though he seemed satisfied with her explanation of what would happen to his house and belongings and how he would reach Mardrata-va. Now he leaned back in his chair with a sigh. "It's beautiful... just beautiful. And we'll be able to be ourselves there - no pretences."

"No pretences, Levi." She tactfully busied herself with stowing the papers in her bag while the old man blew his nose.

"Well, I'd better get packing, eh? I know I can't bring much, but... I can fit my pictures and books in, can't I?"

"Of course - but don't forget to pack some clothes too, will you?" Arwen teased.

Levi abruptly stood up and walked over to where the painting of Linalin hung on the wall. He unhooked it and studied it for a moment. "My niece Rosalind painted this for me; she's quite an artist. 'Course, she moved on years ago - they all did. We keep in touch via the interstellar mails but it's not the same." He looked round at Arwen, almost shyly. "I never married - you probably know that. Rosalind was like a daughter to me... still is."

"You'll see them all again on Mardrata-va."

"Yes, there's a lot to look forward to." He carefully laid down the picture on the top of a cabinet. "Well, no use in standing around here. I'd better get cracking."

Arwen produced the communicator that Kirk had loaned her, from her pocket. "I'll ask them to beam you down a few containers. All right if they put them in the garden?"

"Sure, sure thing." Levi began lifting books from his shelves. She could see that, now the idea of Mardrata-va was sinking in, he was getting excited.

"No rush, Levi. The Enterprise won't be leaving till tomorrow night - they're giving the crew a break."

Levi looked slightly crestfallen. "Well... no, I might as get started. Better than waiting around." He glanced at his wrist chronometer. "Hell, it's lunch time already. I'd ask you to stay for a bite, but I've hardly got anything in the house..."

"It's all right. I was planning to take a look round the town, anyway." She contacted the Enterprise and told them what she wanted. A faint hum from outside announced the arrival of the containers.

"Well, I'll see you again tomorrow afternoon, if that's all right?"

"That'll be fine. I'll be all packed by then, don't fret. And I'll get my affairs wound up - lucky there's not many of them."

Arwen smiled. "And don't worry about settling the bills - the Federation'll do all that. Look on it as compensation for such short notice. Oh, almost forgot to give you this - " She rummaged in the copious bag and brought out an official looking document. "This is your authorisation, signed by the President of the Federation Council. If you have any problems, tell whoever it is to run a computer check on this and that will straighten things out."

"I'm much obliged, Arwen - for everything."

He followed her out to the front door, a few books tucked under his arm, and deposited them in one of the containers. "No time like the present," he said in answer to her amused expression. She set off along the avenue, waving goodbye to Levi, and headed for the square where she had arrived: she was sure that she had seen a small restaurant on its west side.

Looking at the prices, she could only be glad that official channels had agreed to pick up the tab for all her expenses. Deciding that she could probably squeeze in a guest for 'business purposes', she contacted the Enterprise again. "Hello, Enterprise. This is Arwen, the roving ambassador here."

Uhura responded, a barely suppressed note of amusement in her voice. "Enterprise here, Ambassador. How can we help?"

"Hello, Lieutenant. Can you put me through to Ensign Marianne Raesdal, please?"

There was a pause, a few clicks, then the answer came.

"I'm sorry, Ambassador Tithoniél, she's already beamed down."

"All right. Well, thanks anyway, Lieutenant." Pocketing the communicator, she headed for the shady interior.

"Just smell that perfume, Jim. Nothing like it on the Enterprise, huh?"

"Nothing at all, Bones." Kirk was forced to agree. Lying on the soft grass, his eyes closed, he was able to relax properly for the first time in weeks. No responsibilities, no reports to fill in... it felt gorgeous. "Hmm... It's good to stretch your legs planetside for a while."

"And feel the sun on your face..." added McCoy.

"Perfect..."

For a while, the two men lay in a drowsy and companionable silence. Overhead, a gentle breeze rustled the leaves so that their patterns of light and shade shifted constantly. Their rustling was an ideal balm for the strains and tensions of life on the Enterprise.

"Pity Spock's not here..." Kirk remarked, lazily.

"Just when I was beginning to enjoy myself, Jim, you have to go and say something like that." There was mock disgust in the Doctor's tone but Kirk could tell he was feeling too relaxed to put much effort into it.

"Why should Spock's name disturb you, Bones?" Kirk asked, innocently.

"Well... if he was here, that overgrown walking computer bank would probably tell us the ship's facilities could provide everything we've got here - sunlight, cool breeze, perfumed air - without the added inconvenience of flies and sunburn. All we'd have to do is take a walk down to deck eight and visit the entertainment centre."

"He'd probably be right at that, Bones."

"I might have known you'd support him - "

"But on the other hand, he might say that, just for once, we're behaving logically on vacation."

"Huh?"

"A vacation, to Vulcans, means a complete rest. And we're doing just that."

"Oh, well, I guess you're right." McCoy sat up, massaging a slight crick in his neck. "But for my money, this beats deck eight any day - Jim!"

"What is it, Bones - " began Kirk, sitting up, but the Doctor was already haring across the grass covered space at the centre of the square, his previous lethargy forgotten. Kirk leaped to his feet and raced after him, though unable to see what had alarmed his friend. "What is it?" he called, as he ran up to McCoy. The doctor had stopped beneath the branches of one of the tall old trees that lined this side of the square also. He was peering upwards, anxiously.

"Little kid, Jim; just hanging from one of these branches - by one hand, it looked like."

Kirk frowned, unable to see anything overhead. "Right tree, Bones?"

"I think so, Jim. Kept it in sight all the way over." McCoy began walking up and down - checking the others. "Darned if I can see him now - or her."

Kirk had stepped around the tree and was looking up and down the line of trees in case the child had fallen on the far side. Then he spotted two figures - a man with a small child, riding on his shoulders, walking quickly away along the paved sidewalk that ran past the row of shops opposite. "Bones - "

"What is it, Jim?" You found him?" McCoy joined Kirk and followed the other's gaze. "Well, that looks like... The kid I saw was wearing a blue jumpsuit, too. But how - I mean, there aren't any branches near the ground."

Kirk glanced up at the tree behind them. As McCoy had said, there were no branches on either side of the tree within three to four metres of the ground - only stumps where the tree had been pruned.

"The child's father could have caught him... but that doesn't explain how he got up there in the first place," McCoy continued.

Kirk shrugged. "I'm as much in the dark as you."

McCoy grinned, ruefully. "You know... I'm not imagining things, Jim. I did see that kid in the tree, though how in hell he got up there beats me."

"Well, we've been lying out here long enough, Bones. Let's go back into town."

As they set off, McCoy still protested, bemused, "It wasn't a touch of the sun, either, Jim - the sun here's not that hot anyway."

"I believe you, Bones - truly. It's just that I can't come up with a rational explanation. Maybe over a drink - "

"Ah, that's the most sensible suggestion you've made all day. Lead on, Captain."

The shopping centre with its benches, shaded by trees, opened up before Arwen. For a while, she drifted in and out of the stores, looking for Marianne, but the jostling crowds discouraged her and she soon gave up and headed for the nearest bar.

As her eyes adjusted to the dim, cool interior, she noticed a vaguely familiar figure at a corner table: a dark haired young woman in casual tunic and trousers. Her clothes also were dark - impossible to be sure of the colour in this light but Arwen was fairly sure it would be violet - like the woman's eyes. The identification was confirmed by her slumped and dejected pose. "Marianne?"

The other looked up on surprise, then her face lit up. "Arwen! I thought you must still be held up."

"No, it's all sorted out - I don't have to go back again till tomorrow afternoon. I've been looking for you, actually - Uhura told me you were down here."

"I'm glad you found me anyway."

"Here, let me get you a drink."

For a while, they chatted together. Arwen was pleased to hear Marianne's laughter when she told her about her "audition" for Levi.

"What a nerve! I'd never dare speak to Kledo like that."

"Well, he did have an excuse; it could have been a trick like he said. Us loners get a bit ornery sometimes, anyway."

"Is that how you think of yourself, Arwen?"

"Yes... Well, yes, it is. My parents are dead - I never saw Dad very often 'cos of feud trouble, and Mum died when I was just a baby. So my aunt brought me up, really - but she died when I was seventeen. I've got other family, of course - cousins on both sides. Three sides really - since I'm related to Kledo and Tasra, as well as there being Dad's brother's kids. The rest are distant cousins in the Simra family, but I'd never met any of the family outside Dad and Aunt Bethiline until about seven months ago - when we were all shipped out to Mardrata-va. So, you might say I've got used to my own company."

"I know the feeling," Marianne agreed. "Grandma brought up Mark and me - he's my brother - after our parents were killed in a shuttle crash. We've got cousins, aunts, uncles on Praxis Minor - did have, I should say, since they'll be on Mardrata-va now - but I don't really know them though we've mind-shared a bit."

Arwen swirled the last drops of liquid around the bottom of her glass. "Hmm... I worry sometimes about how I'll manage when I'm finally forced to settle down. Since I left Falkey's Planet I haven't been in the same place for more than three months."

"You'll be fine," Marianne said, smiling. At that moment, a shadow fell across them both. Arwen, who was looking at the other woman, saw a guarded expression come into Marianne's eyes as she looked up. Then she, too, turned to face the newcomer.

"Bones! Fancy seeing you here."

"Do either of you ladies mind if I join you?"

In answer, Arwen pushed out a chair on the other side of the table with her foot. "Not if you bribe us with a drink." Then, contritely, she turned to Marianne. "Sorry, I haven't asked you."

"No, it's all right, I don't mind," Marianne said, still smiling, but Arwen could sense her underlying reluctance.

McCoy asked what they would like to drink, then wandered off to the bar. He soon returned, setting drinks in front of them before seating himself in the chair Arwen had indicated.

"Cheers, Bones." Arwen raised her glass appreciatively to him. "Where's Jim, though? Not still toiling over a pile of reports I hope."

"No, Arwen... er, he was with me but he... bumped into an old friend."

Arwen raised an eyebrow. "A female friend, I suppose - but that really goes without saying." She grinned at Marianne whose pale complexion had taken on a slight rosy tint.

McCoy took a sip at his drink, then lowered it. "How's the official business going?"

"Oh, fine. Our latest recruit should be joining the ship tomorrow. In fact, he can't wait - when I left, he was frantically packing."

"Glad to hear that. But tell him there's no rush - I wouldn't want to lose out on any of this R & R."

"The Captain wouldn't cut it short, would he?" Marianne broke in, anxiously.

"Hell, no, Marianne. The only thing that worries me is something official cropping up to disrupt his own leave. He works harder than any of us."

Arwen nodded, and a silence followed while they sipped at their drinks, relishing the coolness and quietness of the little drinking place. Sensing a slight tension in the atmosphere, originating in Marianne's apprehension at McCoy's presence, Arwen spoke to relieve it. "You know, Bones - I did begin to think you had it in for me when I ended up in sickbay the first three times I came on the Enterprise. Must be quite a change for you, not having to patch me up."

McCoy smiled. "Well, I certainly won't complain about it. But I've been kept pretty busy lately, even without you - matter of fact, I think I may have been overworking, on account of something that happened just now."

"What was that - oh, don't tell me - you couldn't face hanging around another bar." Arwen hid her mischievous grin behind her glass.

"Not at all, young lady, though I hardly touch a drop, as you know. No, it was something I saw when me and Jim were near the beam down point - that square."

"Yes. If you mean the prices in that restaurant window, you weren't seeing things."

"Hell, I never even looked at that - I'm an old country doctor not a high flying dignitary with an expense account."

Marianne was leaning forward, genuinely interested by now. "Don't keep us in suspense, Doctor," she said, distracting the others from their mutual teasing.

"Hmm? Oh, yeah. Well, I thought I saw a little kid - only about two years old - hanging from a branch of one of those trees. I mean - really high up, 'bout four metres off the ground."

"Really?" Arwen asked, concerned. "Was the child hurt?"

"No, Arwen, that's just it. I set a new distance record getting there but the kid had vanished. Then Jim spotted a man and a small child on the sidewalk by the shops - looked like the child I'd seen from the clothes. I still can't figure it out though - how he could've got down from that tree so quick - or get up there in the first place since there were no branches till about three - four metres up. See what I mean about overwork?"

"Mmm..." Arwen frowned. "You know, it's funny but - you're not going to believe this, Bones - I thought I saw something similar."

"You did? Where?"

"On the way here just past that square, as a matter of fact. I was passing a house with a high wall. I just happened to glance up, and I saw eyes looking at me - there was a tree on the other side of the wall, and I thought I saw someone looking at me from among the leaves. Well, this house was on the corner, you see - the eyes disappeared, I kept on walking and when I got to the corner - I heard a man's voice, scolding. Something about "thank goodness your mother's not here." I looked round and saw a man and a child walking away... wasn't wearing a blue jumpsuit was he - or her?"

McCoy set down his empty glass. "That's right. Yours too, huh?" When Arwen nodded, McCoy raised his eyebrows. "Reckon it's that darn transporter. I ought to make a study of it - collective hallucinations following dematerialisation. Always thought it must have an effect on the brain sooner or later - people being reconstituted like dried peas -"

"That's it!" Arwen banged down her drink on the table, splashing it over her sleeve, but didn't even notice. She pushed back her chair, nearly toppling it, and stood up. "Bones, I'm sorry - I have to dash. Just realised something - Marianne, you might be able to help."

"Of... of course," the startled Ensign managed to stutter, but Arwen had already tore outside into the sunlight. "Excuse me, Doctor -"

Diving and twisting through the crowd, she caught up with Arwen who had been forced to slow to a brisk walk, bag swinging by her side. "What... what is it, Arwen?" she puffed.

"Keep your eyes peeled and let me know the moment you spot them: the kid's in a blue jumpsuit."

"Arwen?" The Tithoniél chief did not answer; she was too busy scanning the faces in the crowd. Before long, somewhat out of breath, they reached the square. The people had thinned out by now and they strolled around the square,

Marianne studying the trees this time at Arwen's request. At last, they had completed the circuit.

"Nowhere!" Arwen exclaimed in exasperation. "They were going away from the square when I saw them but Bones must've seen them after that. Blast it! We'll have to check out the other roads."

As they walked slowly from the square, Marianne tried again. "Why do you want to find them?"

Arwen shrugged and hoisted her bag more securely onto her shoulder. "Well, it's crazy, really. I'd rather not say till I have some proof - I'm only going on a hunch at the moment."

Some time later, they returned to the square and sank, wearily, onto a bench in the shade of the trees. Arwen pulled off her shoes with a groan of relief. "Well. What a waste of effort that was. I'm sorry, Marianne."

The Casreem shook her head. "It's all right, I don't mind." She gazed out over the large, grass covered space, leaning against the backrest and stretching out her legs. After a few moment's companionable silence, she glanced at Arwen who had removed her hat and was ruffling her long ginger hair. "Do you mind if I ask you something?"

"No, go ahead."

"Well... this may sound silly, but... Where did you get your name? It's from a book, isn't it?"

Arwen chuckled. "Yes, Lord of the Rings. It was one of Mum's favourites, apparently, and since our clan name sounds like something out of it, anyway..." She had turned to answer Marianne's question; now she stopped, her gaze fixed on the foot of a tree just a few metres distant. "Don't move," she said quietly.

"What is it?" Marianne kept her face turned toward Arwen despite the sudden urge to turn round. Her neck began to feel stiff.

"That child I saw... must be. There's a little boy over there, watching us." Arwen stood up, slowly, and began to walk carefully toward the tree. Marianne now allowed her head to turn; she could not have held out much longer anyway. The child was sucking his fingers, wide eyes at Arwen's approach, but still standing his ground. But as she drew yet nearer, he began to toddle away.

"Don't go," Arwen coaxed, crouching down to be closer to his level. "Look!" A glowing ball appeared in her hand and rose into the air, bobbing toward the child whose face lit up in a delighted grin. It stopped above him, dancing just out of reach, enticingly. He stretched up, waving his hand, then gave a little cry of frustration.

"Arwen?" Marianne stood up and went over to her but the Tithoniél chief gave no sign of having heard her, concentration fixed on the ball of light that still moved above the child's wildly flapping arms. He jumped up but fell back, still unable to reach. Then, so gradually that Marianne was not at first sure if what she saw was actual or a trick of the light, he began to rise, then bobbed jerkily upwards, still trying to catch the ball. "Arwen!" Marianne gasped and clutched at the other woman's arm, breaking her concentration. The ball disappeared but the child went on rising, giggling with delight. "Arwen - a telekinetic. Those people - the ones I told you about - they're already here!"

Arwen turned, to see the pallor of Marianne's skin. "I don't think so," she tried to reassure her. "Don't worry - "

"Andy!" A shout cut across her words. They both turned to face the woman running toward them whose blonde hair, as fair as the child's own, streamed behind her. "Andy, come down here - at once!" Still giggling, the little boy swooped down, probably intending a new game of flying round his mother's head, but her arm snapped out with the ease of long practice, and she pulled him in. As she clasped him to her, his chortles turned to a howl of protest. Ignoring it, she backed away, staring at the two strangers with frightened, suspicious eyes.

"Don't be afraid - please," Arwen began. "We're friends: we want to help. We're not Human, we're Mardratan."

The woman looked from one to the other. "Mardratan? But - but you're off-worlders, aren't you? Your clothes - "

"I'm Arwen Tithoniél, this is Marianne Raesdal."

"I'm Casreem," added Marianne.

"Casreem...? Tithoniél? But that's impossible; the clans have warred for centuries. I've never seen any

Madrata outside my own family."

"The clans are at peace now - have been for at least a century. A lot's happened since your clan left Earth."

"The clans... at peace, you say? Is this a trick?"

"Please - I want to show you something. Can we sit down?"

Edgily, the woman led them over to the bench, sitting on the end, away from them. Arwen took out her portfolio of documents and handed it over: as Andy happily played with the pictures of Madrata-va, the woman read the deed and other documents. "This is incredible," she said, at last. "The Federation's willing to give us all this?"

"It's open to you, too, if you want it - and any other Mardran you know. You would've been contacted like everyone else but no one knew Siashan existed any more. The last few on Earth died shortly after the clans re-established contact with each other. I suppose they didn't realise some had made it to the colonies."

"Oh, they wouldn't have made a point of finding out where we went - you see, a few families made it out here eventually - descendants of some of the first to leave Earth as colonists. I think there was some bad blood between our ancestors and those that stayed behind on Earth. There's only me now - and Andy - the rest moved on again, including my brother. He migrated to Gamma Cleon years ago - got a family of his own. He married a Human woman - I've never met her..." Her voice trailed off as she looked down at a picture of Madrata-va that Andy was chewing, and absentmindedly took it from him. "My - my husband's Human, too. He - he knows about me... I told him. I knew it might come out in any children we had."

"There's a place for him, too, on Madrata-va." As the woman looked up, sudden hope in her eyes, Arwen added, "We've lost a lot of our intolerance, believe me. We're glad to know there are still Siashan around."

The woman smiled, obviously relieved, then laughed sheepishly. "What am I thinking of? I haven't even introduced myself. Suzanna Jaesar; Geoff took my name, too - said he liked it better than his - Crabb." She handed back the papers to Arwen. "Look, you'd better come home with me and we'll explain all this to Geoff. God knows what he'll say."

Some time later, the four of them were relaxing over coffee in the Jaesars' lounge, explanations finally out of the way.

"You know, I still can't believe it." Geoff pushed back the wayward dark curls that kept flopping into his eyes. "A whole planet of people with... well, amazing talents. And we've got an invitation to join them."

"Do you want to, Geoff? I mean, I know what Arwen and Marianne have told us, but there's bound to be some prejudice. And you'd be the only Human - or one of the few if David's wife agrees to come - on the entire planet."

Geoff reached out and squeezed her hand. "It'll be good for you and Andy. I know how hard it is for you, holding yourself in - and it's impossible for him. Suppose someone else had happened along and seen him?"

"They did actually - our ship's Doctor," Marianne put in. "He attributed it to the combined effect of overwork and the transporter!"

When the chuckles had died away, Suzanna admitted, "We have had some lucky escapes, though. Andy's very strong for his age - he can manage much more than I could at that age." She automatically redirected the flower vase that had been floating across the room toward her, somewhat erratically, and smoothly landed it on the coffee table.

"Well, I think that's settled, then," Geoff announced, brightly. "Madrata-va, here we come!"

Now that Levi was settled into his quarters and she had ensured that his precious books and family mementoes were likewise safely stowed in their berth in a storeroom, Arwen made her way up to the bridge. She emerged to find Lieutenant Uhura back on duty. "Any reply to my message about the Jaesars yet, Lieutenant?"

"I'm afraid not, Ambassador."

"Arwen, please."

Uhura smiled. "Arwen, it is. And please call me Penda."

"Delighted to. I wish Starfleet would hurry up on this one."

"It's a little too soon to expect an answer from official channels, Arwen, even so. They just don't work that way."

"Yes, I'm sure you're right. I had hoped to give the Jaesars some definite news about their transportation before I go, rather than leave them guessing. Pity they can't come on the Enterprise, really."

"Well, there is another six hours before we're due to leave orbit. Maybe you'll hear before then," Uhura sympathised.

"I certainly hope so." Arwen began to turn away.

"I'll let you know right away if a message comes in."

"Thanks, Penda. I appreciate it."

On the way back to her cabin, she suddenly recalled her words to Kirk before she had beamed down the previous day. In all the excitement, she had forgotten. He had not been on the bridge, so unless he was still on shore leave - and she was certain that someone who drove himself as much as the Captain wouldn't be - he should be in his cabin.

Sure enough, his voice answered her press on the door buzzer. "Come."

"Reports, Jim? She eyed the small pile of tapes on his desk. "Hope you got some rest yesterday."

"You sound like Bones. Is he paying you to check up on me?" Kirk asked, mildly. He indicated the chair in front of his desk.

"Who, me, Jim?" Arwen sat down, assuming her best "innocent me" expression.

"Well, you can tell the good doctor I've had all the rest I need. I'm catching up on the last of those reports he dragged me away from. How's Mr. Tolkma settling in, by the way?"

"Oh, fine, Jim, fine."

Kirk smiled. "In that case, I take it you're here about Ensign Raesdal?"

Arwen raised an eyebrow; she might have known he would not forget. "Got it in one, Jim." Her green eyes were suddenly serious. "Jim, she... she feels that you - and other members of your crew who know she's telepathic - may be prejudiced against her because of it."

"Prejudiced?" Stunned, Kirk gazed at her. "Why should she... Wait, there was something..." A crease appeared between his brows. "A few days before we arrived at Sigma Orionsis IV, when she came to report her Mardran origin; we had a slight difference of opinion. I thought I'd managed to straighten things out, but I may have been wrong." His frown deepened. "My memory of that whole period is pretty hazy."

"I'm not surprised, Jim. The telepathic torture you were subjected to is bound to have had some effect. I've had a good long... talk with Marianne and - well, at least some of what's getting her down is correct. She doesn't blame people for avoiding her, especially one who was actually there when she had to attack that boy. She accepts that they're nervous - even afraid of her. But I think she may have magnified your reaction somewhat."

Kirk smiled, ruefully. "So far as I can recall, I was very surprised - maybe even a little annoyed that she'd used her powers to influence Starfleet personnel - to pass medicals," he added, seeing Arwen's astonishment.

"Oh, I see. Well, Tithoniél methods are less objectionable, Jim, but she didn't have that option. Believe me, the Casreem are very reluctant to do any mind tampering at all. And she did want to get into space awful bad."

"I can appreciate that feeling," Kirk said, recalling his own childhood yearning. "I'll try and smooth things over. But... if she's still unhappy after that, her best option would be to transfer - maybe to a ship where such abilities are more common among the crew."

Arwen nodded. "Thanks, Jim. Well, I mustn't keep you from your reports."

Whistling, she left the cabin and headed for her own quarters. As she entered, the sound of the viewscreen on her desk alerted her. She crossed quickly to it and punched the controls. Uhura's image appeared. "I've got your reply, Arwen."

"Thanks, I'll be right up."

At last, the Enterprise could be on its way once more. Arwen turned from the window from which she had watched Antigone drop away into the absolute blackness and disappear, then left the observation gallery. She headed back toward the lighted sections of the ship - and people. The Jaesars were not aboard, but at least they now had the go-ahead to wind up their affairs and pack the belongings they wanted to take with them. And she had spoken to Marianne who had seen the Captain and undertaken to "give things one more try".

Another three days and Arwen would be away again to visit the next family on her list. The Enterprise would not be able to wait for her this time, however, and another ship would be diverted to collect her and the clansfolk. But, for now, her responsibilities were discharged and she was looking forward to dinner with the Captain, his senior officers, and Levi.

Taking her time, she showered and dressed for dinner: she had decided to wear her ex-stage outfit in honour of Levi. The shimmering green tunic and trousers were a trifle ostentatious but were the only 'partying' things she possessed: she had never really bothered about clothes. Perhaps that was a legacy of having little and living rough.

Ready at last, she hurried along the corridor to collect Levi who would get lost without an escort through the seeming maze of corridors. Suddenly, turning a corner, she faltered and swayed dizzily against the wall. Jim... in danger? It struck her like a chill wind, like someone walking over her grave.

Through a haze, she heard a woman's voice. "Are you all right, Ambassador?" She opened her eyes to see a concerned crewmember.

"Fine, thanks. Just a slight giddy spell. Not enough regular meals, I guess." The woman smiled and, reassured, moved on. Arwen forced herself to shrug off the last traces of the cold foreboding that had settled around her shoulders; in any case, the sensation was already fading fast and she could not recollect precisely how it had felt. She hurried on, toward Levi's quarters.

When they entered the officers' mess together, she was relieved to see that she had imagined it, after all. Kirk and the others rose to greet them; Kirk appeared as healthy as he had been earlier in the day. There was nothing to worry about - just her imagination working overtime as usual. She and Levi seated themselves between Kirk and McCoy and soon, amid the glow of good food, wine and conversation, Arwen's forebodings had dissipated.

But, in the fullness of time, she would have good cause to remember them... and despair.



3 A QUESTION OF ETHICS

I remember how it started; the day I got fired from Starfleet. Well, it wasn't on that day exactly, and I wasn't exactly fired either, but near as makes no difference either one. The Captain was very fair though; I'll say that for him. And after all the uncharitable things I used to think about him! Mind you, in retrospect my opinion of him went up and down like Spock's eyebrow. Shows how mixed up I was in those days.

Well, where shall I start? Looking out of my window at the sunshine, the field of grain waving, golden, in the breeze, I feel even more reluctant. But I promised Arwen I'd tape this so everyone can get the facts right, and I suppose after all the rumours and the calls for a censure at the next Federation Council meeting, I'd better hurry and finish this before things get any worse.

I'll start from the beginning then, even though it's going to be rather embarrassing, to say the least... but if

Arwen could publish her account of the whole Tithoniél leadership trouble, I can grit my teeth, too. I remember, I was checking my tricorder, ready to beam down on another planetary survey. After the last one, I can't say I was feeling all that keen! Besides myself and the transporter officer, there were four others standing around - in the transporter room, that is. We were waiting for the senior officers.

I might as well tell you who the other people were. Firstly, there was a botanist, Jefferies - I can't recall her first name, Annabel or something. She was talking to Hans Goertz, the historian, her bobbed chestnut hair shining under the bright lights and her face alive with pre-beam down excitement. All of them were looking forward to the mission in their own way, I could tell - which made another difference between them and me. But I'm coming on to that. Anyway, I don't know what she was talking about - probably some past landing party. Goertz - quiet and diffident as always - was nodding occasionally, looking politely interested - also as always. Although I'd given up trying to talk to any of them by then, I knew Goertz had no interest outside his own discipline, so I was one up on Jefferies - or maybe she just needed someone to talk at. I had a quiet, not very nice chuckle to myself; what I could have told Goertz about Earth history!

The other two were both security guards - Lennards and Demetz. They were chatting quietly to each other, standing apart from Goertz and Jefferies. I could sense companionship between them - team spirit, or whatever you'd like to call it. Whatever it was, I was cut off from all of it - shut out. It was as if there was a space between us, greater than the physical distance. Skulking over in my corner, I was the perpetual stranger, the outsider... the Other that lurks in the Human psyche.

I'd better explain a few things even though most of you know at least the outline of the 'Vendasi affair' as it's come to be called. I know a lot of you condemned me in your hearts when that news first broke... especially the Casreem. I don't blame you; I condemned myself. But, now that I've melded with a few of you... and, in fact, the technique I picked up on the very landing party I'm telling you about, helped a lot with that... you can see that I never meant to kill that boy. I wouldn't have even been capable of trying if I hadn't been as mad as hell. Anyway, by the time I'm telling you about, word had long been round the ship: a starship's grapevine is the most efficient ever, believe me. Whatever gratitude people felt toward me for restoring their Captain - and saving Mr. Spock, because a certain nurse in sickbay (probably my only supporter on the whole ship) had put that round too - they still didn't know the half of it and it was overshadowed by their distrust of me.

I can even understand their view: a woman who can kill with her mind is pretty hair-raising. The senior officers weren't able to silence the whispers that had spread like wildfire through the lower decks. My one consolation was that they still thought I was Human - only the four most senior officers knew otherwise - and so Mardrata-va had not been harmed. The fuss had died down by now and all that remained was the distant attitude of colleagues I'd once hoped would unbend, and the odd looks in the corridors. The worst thing that had happened while the nine days wonder was in full swing was when I'd walked into a rec room one evening and found a whole crowd round a table where Phil Surrey was sitting. Remember - he was the guard I'd lashed out to protect. "So, what happened then...?" a voice had been saying, but ended in a yelp of pain. Amidst embarrassed silence, I'd walked out again, but the door didn't shut quickly enough to cut off the babble of voices that broke out behind me. Somehow, I'd maintained my dignity till I got back to my cabin and could shut myself in the wash area. I spent a lot of time in that tiny cubby hole in those days.

Just as well Noreen hadn't been there with her nosiness and gossip. In fact, she'd taken to spending her evenings elsewhere and edging past me with a fixed smile on her face when she dashed out early each morning - and she who'd never been early for anything in her life before! Funny to think I'd once racked my brains for excuses to avoid her and would now almost have begged for her company. No, the Captain's a fair man - a good man, as Arwen has testified - but he couldn't compel his crew to be as fair. Ironically enough, I'd actually decided to request a transfer once I got back from this landing party. It was nearly four months since I'd set Arwen and the few hours I'd spent on shore leave in her company had been the only happy ones I'd had since Sigma Orionsis. But even then, I still hadn't admitted the truth to myself - that I could only be happy among my own people. I'd been very tempted to pack it all in and go home only the day before when I'd received a tape from Mardrata-va. That was another occasion for shutting myself in the wash area. I mulled over my grandmother's words: "No point in sticking it out any longer if you're miserable, Mari. Humans have irrational fears... it'll take a long time to overcome them. Not many centuries since they were burning some of us, is it? If they won't accept you... well, damn 'em and come home." And my brother Mark had peered over her shoulder, saying, "Come home, Mari. We miss you." Just thinking about it now brought tears to my eyes.

I blinked them back, realising that the atmosphere in the room had changed; it was now brisk and purposeful. The Captain and Dr. McCoy had entered; our party was now complete. Quickly, I took my place on the pad with the others...



"Energise," Kirk commanded.

Moments later, they were materialising on a world that, superficially at least, was not dissimilar to Sigma Orionsis IV, site of Marianne's first planetary survey. But in reality this world was populated by intelligent humanoids possessing a technological expertise which had evidenced itself in the pollution of air and water. The landing party therefore wore trousers, and tunics with woven cord belts, to approximate the dress of the inhabitants.

The beam-down point was in a scrub and woodland covered area about two or three kilometers from the nearest town. They found themselves on a slight slope, trees around them rustling in the gentle breeze, dead leaves underfoot forming a thick carpet. Unslinging their tricorders, they got to work, noting the evidence of humanoid presence in the past - rusty objects that might once have been containers for food and drink, and signs of pollarding on the trees.

Marianne sniffed the air, detecting a faint unpleasant odour: traces of the industrial pollution detected by an earlier probe. Her tricorder confirmed her finding and she reported it to the Captain, adding that the pollution appeared to have increased. Then she continued her scan for animal life, which was her special responsibility. Nothing registered though scratch marks were visible on the bark of some of the trees; the animals must have run away at the first sound of the transporter beam. Their extreme wariness suggested that human hunters were common here.

"Very good, Ensign. We'll head up hill; see if we can get a view of the surrounding area."

The party set off, alert to any sound or trace on their tricorders. There would be no splitting up on this survey; it was too risky. Twigs and nettles caught at Marianne's legs so that she was grateful for the more practical trousers that the need for disguise had provided. Listening to Jefferies' voice reporting her observations on the vegetation, she relaxed her mental barriers, hoping to pick up advance warning if humanoids were in the vicinity.

The ground levelled out, broad boles of trees receding into the distance all around them. The party made a brief halt while Jefferies collected a few botanical specimens and stowed them into the cloth shoulder bag that she wore. Then they continued on. After a few moments, a flicker of movement ahead alerted Marianne. She aimed her tricorder at it.

"Sir," she said, quietly. "There's a humanoid ahead - thirty metres. Behind one of the trees."

"Stow away your tricorders, ladies and gentlemen," Kirk ordered softly. Instantly, Goertz, McCoy and the two women slipped the instruments inside the cloth bags they each carried. "All right, we handle this as we discussed; friendly strangers passing through."

A sudden powerful intuition made Marianne look up... to see the figure astride the branch above her head. Then another mind - hostile, bitter - touched hers: instinctively she slammed down her barriers, projecting revulsion at the same instant. A shocked cry rang out somewhere overhead.

"Captain, look out - " She spun, shouting the warning, her dark hair fanning out behind her, as time seemed to stretch out - out - out - and saw Kirk and the others, frozen in midstride, mid-gesture, like figures in a holo-image. Then, as time snapped back and a heavy net fell about her shoulders knocking her to the ground, fear and despair claimed her. Those others - kin of the ones on Sigma Orionsis - had come at last for vengeance...

Slowly, thought returned until Marianne became aware that she was slumped onto her knees with her arms stretched out on either side, ropes cutting cruelly into her wrists. Without raising her head, she opened her eyes.

The first thing she saw was firelight reflected upon the ground beneath her knees and on her body. Carefully, she looked to her left without moving her head. Through her curtain of hair, she glimpsed the rope that held her left wrist, stretched out until it was fastened securely around the trunk of a stout tree. And now, over the crackle of the fire, she could hear voices, raised in anger and coming closer.

"Savid, I swear it! One of them's a tel - must be. I was rejected!"

"Which mind did you invade?"

"I'm not sure; I just aimed a directional beam - "

"Dorabi, together our sweep got all of them; their minds were defenceless. You must have imagined it."

"But I didn't, I tell you! One of them can block."

Cautiously, Marianne raised her head a little. She saw at once that she was at the perimeter of a makeshift camp, at the centre of which a small fire brightly burned. Kirk and the others, like her, were tied between trees around the outskirts, all apparently unconscious. She registered all of this in an instant, then noticed two figures emerging from the bushes opposite her, both seemingly engrossed in their argument. Quickly, she lowered her head. She heard the footsteps draw nearer, crunching over a few stray leaves blown into the clearing, then a third voice spoke, from a little further away: a woman's voice, clear and vibrant.

"Never mind all that; what concerns me is how they got so far inside the border without being spotted. If we're wide open... Lucky for us they didn't have telpanite." There was a general murmur of agreement. Marianne decided to risk another look.

Luck was with her; the four figures standing a few metres away, grouped around the fire were facing away from her - two with their backs turned, the other two sideways on. In the growing gloom, their tunics and trousers bore dark splotches - probably dyed green and brown for camouflage, Marianne guessed. The firelight picked out two of the faces, however; one, a dark haired, bearded man looking to be in his early thirties, his face serious, the other a young woman of average height whose wavy, close cropped auburn hair was turned to a rich orange by the fire's glow. One hand rested lightly on her hip, the other was held in a clenched fist. "Dvar should be here soon and then we'll get her story. If there's been any slacking though - " It was her voice that Marianne had heard breaking up the argument.

"If there has, we'll tear the hide off her," completed the dark haired man. He had been one of those arguing, the one who denied the existence of a "tel" among the prisoners.

"Suppose Dvar doesn't get here - suppose these are just advance scouts for a larger force." It was a blonde, stockily built woman who spoke and Marianne recognised her voice too: Dorabi. So it was her mind that had touched Marianne's during the ambush. "The whole patrol could be dead - we might have sent Plon into a trap."

There was a sudden low whistle. Instantly, the group sprang apart, staring round at the trees, unlimbering projectile weapons from their shoulders with fluid movements that spoke of long practice. The auburn haired woman drew a long knife from a sheath at her belt; its blade glinted wickedly in the firelight. Marianne quickly lowered her head again before they should notice her, and clenched her teeth at the growing agony of a strained shoulder and arm muscles.

The whistle came again: two long, a short, then a long. Then there was a rustle in the bushes round the camp and she heard sighs of relief as the band relaxed.

"What news, Bjen?" It was the voice of the dark haired man.

"Plon's on his way; Dvar's with him," a deeper voice replied.

"Thank the Maker," breathed Dorabi.

"All right, Bjen. Keep a good lookout." It was the auburn haired woman who spoke. Marianne risked a quick glance, in time to see Bjen nod and depart. He was a short man, wearing a patch over his left eye: in the firelight, a jagged scar burned lividly down his face from beneath the covering of cloth.

Another low whistle sounded and quiet footsteps heralded the arrival of the newcomers. "All right, Savid - what's all this about?"

Marianne saw a dark haired woman, about thirty years old, well built but with the healthy look of one who had a hard job and enjoyed it. She frowned at the bearded man opposite. Beside her, a slightly built young man - hardly more than a boy - cleanshaven and with pale hair burnished to light gold in the firelight, shrugged his shoulders. "Don't look at me, Savid; all I said was B group wanted to see her."

The auburn haired woman stepped forward, laying a hand on Savid's shoulder as if warning him that she would deal with this. The newcomer continued: "No one could have got through our patrols, I tell you - no one! Every zinnach of that border has been covered, surveyed, mind swept - they couldn't have got in spitting distance before we smelt 'em, let alone picked up their greasy little minds!"

"Dvar, I sent for you," the auburn haired woman said mildly, but the other stopped her tirade, a look of cautious respect on her face. "I sent word because these didn't grow up like fungi." She waved a hand toward Kirk and McCoy. Quickly, Marianne lowered her head again. She heard a muttered curse from Dvar.

"Perhaps they were dropped in by flitter?"

"Not a chance," Savid objected, instantly. "We'd hear them, even at night - "

"Maybe they've got quieter engines by now," Dvar interrupted. "After all, who really knows what the scum are up to? They're tricky enough." There was a general murmur of agreement. "What I suggest is you get the truth out of these and then get word to me. I have to get back now: Soren's good enough but I think we all sleep easier when I'm there, don't you?" There was an underlying acidity to her words; Marianne wondered if it was directed at Savid. They certainly didn't appear to get on with each other.

"All right," the auburn haired woman agreed. "Thanks for coming up here, Dvar."

Dvar grunted an acknowledgement; Marianne heard a few rustles among the bushes and then, evidently, she had gone, for Plon spoke quietly.

"She could be right, Savid. If they have got flitters..."

"We'll have our own soon enough. And when we do, we can burn their filthy hovels to the ground!" broke in the third man, who had not spoken before. Savage chuckles greeted this comment.

"We'll make a group meld tomorrow night," the auburn haired woman announced. "Maybe some of the other zones will have heard something."

"If the council agrees to it," Plon said, sarcastically.

"They'll have to. The situation's too serious for them to defy the people's wishes on this - and they will be behind us," the woman insisted. "As for the prisoners - we'll get the truth from them, kill them and return to Homebase in the morning."

Marianne's heart dropped at those words, but then she was gripped by terror as she realised that footsteps were approaching her. Well, it was better to seize the psychological advantage... She straightened up to face them, her face frozen in an unnatural calm that hid inner panic.

The auburn haired woman halted, a few paces in front of her, studying her with interest. Behind, Savid raised his eyebrows. "Training their agents better these days," he remarked, glancing round at his companions. To Marianne, he said, "You know we're going to get the truth out of you - one way or another. You can't resist our mind probes so why not relax: make things less unpleasant for yourself?"

Marianne met his gaze. "What makes you so sure I can't resist?" she countered. Behind Savid, she was aware of the others drawing together, their faces puzzled, wary. Maybe she could build on that...?

"No dumb can block a tel," Savid asserted, confidently. The auburn haired woman stood aside as he came forward: clearly, he was to deal with this himself. As he reached toward Marianne's temples with splayed fingers, she spoke quickly.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you." Something in her voice made him halt, frowning. "If you mean non-telepath by 'dumb' you might be right - but I'm not 'dumb'."

"I told you, Savid." Dorabi lunged forward and caught at Savid's arm, her heart shaped face animated with excitement. "It must have been her who blocked me."

Impatiently, Savid shrugged her off. "I'm not taken in so easily - "

Plon agreed. "It's a bluff - must be. What would a tel be doing with dumbs? They didn't have her tied up, did they? And she's not from our zone."

"I'm not from anybody's zone - I've only just got here. Please - tell me what's going on?" The others stared at her, surprised; they had almost forgotten her presence during their argument. Now they looked uncertainly at each other.

"Could tels be working for dumbs?" Plon asked, doubtfully.

"Impossible!" Savid objected. "How could they coerce a tel?"

"Telpanite!" They all looked round at the auburn haired woman who stood with arms folded, calmly watching them. "Isn't it obvious? If they've got her family..."

Savid turned back to Marianne. "Is that true?" he asked, more kindly. "There's no need to be afraid; we'll help you."

"Could you untie me, please?" Marianne asked, not bothering to keep the pain and weariness from her voice. Recollecting themselves, they hurried to cut her bonds and lead her over to the fire. But still the third man, older than the rest with skin wrinkled by exposure to the elements, and hair thinning and streaked with grey, hung back.

"Why should we believe her? We haven't melded with her - how do we know she's a tel?" Simultaneously, Marianne felt a needle-sharp probe, fuelled by anger, come sweeping in toward her: hastily, she strengthened her shields to meet it. The man reeled back, eyes widening in shock and surprise, and fell to his knees.

"Meric, are you all right? Meric? Dorabi asked, bending over the kneeling figure. He straightened up, rubbing his head ruefully. "Yes, I think so... It was like running headfirst against a stone wall."

"I'm sorry... I just..."

"No, no it was my fault - I was so convinced you must be a dumb." Meric climbed to his feet. "But you're a strong one, all right."

The others faces brightened and Marianne sensed the mass of all five minds in concert moving to greet her in an image of hands stretched out in welcome. "No, no please, I can't meld with you - too many." She sensed them split apart again as their faces creased in consternation.

"What is it?" demanded Savid. "Why can't you meld?"

"I can - but I've only melded with two people at a time before. Please - I'll explain everything, but vocally."

Still looking concerned and confused, they nodded slowly. "All right," the auburn haired woman agreed. "Shall we start with an exchange of names? I am Lan." She gestured to each in turn, naming them.

"I'm Marianne," she answered, massaging her wrists slowly.

"You say you're not from a zone?" Savid asked.

"Yes, that's right. I was brought up by my grandmother - just me and my brother."

"Where was that?" asked Plon.

"I... I can't tell you. I'm not allowed - " Marianne said, awkwardly, remembering the Prime Directive. Angry murmurs greeted her response, and Lan stood, drawing her knife.

"Name the one who threatens you - "

"No! No, don't kill them - there's no need." She lowered her voice as Lan stared down at her. "They're not enemies."

"But they're dumbs - " Dorabi objected.

"Please." Marianne looked from one to the other of them, pleading with her eyes. "Release them. They're not a danger to you, I promise. We came in peace - to learn. We didn't know there were any telepaths here." The others looked at each other questioningly, and Marianne sensed a rapid exchange of thoughts beyond her barriers.

A sudden groan from one of the captives decided the situation. Savid stood up. "Lan?"

"Untie them."

Semi-conscious, the Enterprise personnel were dragged over to the fire. While the others stood guard over them, Savid went over to the backpacks piled against a tree and came back with a phaser, communicator and tricorder. Sitting down beside Marianne, he laid the objects on the grass before her.

"What are these?"

She hesitated, looking over at Kirk and the others. Then she pointed to the communicator. "That is a... a type of radio."

"And this?" He tapped the small object beside it: all of the landing party had been carrying the smaller type one phasers that could be concealed in their clothing. When she did not answer, he picked it up and began fiddling with the controls. Her hand shot out to catch his wrist but the cry of warning died on her lips. "It's a weapon, isn't it?" he asked. He gazed calmly into her eyes. "Why are you afraid to tell me?"

"We're outsiders, we - we take an oath not to interfere in other people's way of life - not to explain our presence."

Savid looked at the others and again she sensed a mental conference between them. Then he turned back to Marianne. "If you show us how to use these weapons, it could make all the difference. These things are so much more advanced... than anything the dumbs have." She knew he had been going to say 'than anything we have'.

"Their charges are limited," she said cautiously, without admitting that the 'limited' charge would now down hundreds before expiring. "And you couldn't get a replacement."

Savid raised his eyebrows at 'charge' and she realised that, inadvertently, she had said too much.

"Well, maybe they'll still come in handy," he said, neutrally. "This now..." He tapped the tricorder. "I checked it out earlier; it appears to pick up readings of some kind. What is it - a detection instrument?"

Marianne shook her head helplessly. "I'm not allowed to tell you - I'm sorry."

"There was a pouch too... we managed to get it open. Looked like medical instruments we thought... much more advanced than the dumbs ever had though, even before the war."

Desperately, Marianne seized on the distraction. "Tell me about the war."

"Let's start supper first," Lan answered.

For a while, the group was busy; Plon left the camp for a while, to check traps, while a pan was produced from a backpack, filled with water from a flask, and set to boil over the campfire, suspended from a metal tripod. Vegetables were also produced from backpacks, peeled, diced and added to the water. By the time Plon returned, carrying his traps and the carcass of a small animal, which he had prepared already, Marianne had managed to bring the Captain up to date.

"Ensign, whatever happens, you must not tell them about the Federation - "

"Sir, what choice do I have? They're telepaths - if I refuse, they'll just read your minds and I don't think they'll be very fussy how they do it."

"Do you have something to say, dumb?" Marianne looked up at the sound of Lan's voice and saw the other woman with her hand on the hilt of her knife.

"It's all right," she said, quickly. "They're my... friends." Despite herself, the word stuck in her throat momentarily; she had too many bad memories at the back of her mind for it not to. Lan sensed the doubt behind her words.

"All right. We'll speak after supper."

Soon the meal was being spooned into cans which bore handles at each end. Savid left the camp to take Bjen his supper, then returned and rummaged in his backpack. "Yes, I've got a spare stewcan for you, Marianne."

"I - I have to check it first. Your food might not be safe for me to eat." As Savid watched with interest, Marianne scanned the stewpot with a tricorder. "It's fine," she announced. As Savid filled a stewcan and handed it to her, she glanced at the landing party.

"What about my friends?" She was determined not to hesitate on the word again.

"Oh, there's plenty left for them. We'll wash our cans out for them afterwards."

Nodding, Marianne tucked into the tasty stew, trying to ignore the concerned gazes of Kirk and the others.

Spock headed for his cabin and sleep, having left orders to be awakened if a signal should come in from the planet. There had been no word since the Captain's call in to report their safe landing but that was not undue cause for concern; it was possible that they had met some inhabitants and were unable to use their communicators: in any case, they had been planning to spend the night on the planet. Why then, did he feel a twinge of concern? It was illogical; only Humans worried without proper cause. He would banish it with meditation.

As Kirk and the others were handed cans of stew, Savid began the story of the war. "When tels were first born to dumbs, they refused to believe it. Most of them kept quiet. But after a while, they realised that we did exist - and that there were more and more of us. Then they looked on us as enemies and their governments - they were divided into many different geographical areas - tried to control us, use us for their own ends. They shut us in institutions and camps, drugged us, brainwashed us, tried to get us to use our ability for them as spies, secret weapons. But by then there were so many tels, the ones outside the camps formed resistance groups and rescued the prisoners. Pretty soon, it was war - the dumbs forgot their previous hostilities to each other and tried to wipe us out instead."

Lan laughed humourlessly. "Their armies came against us - they tried bombs, too."

Savid nodded. "Our abilities had strengthened though, so we could mass-meld and control vast numbers of them."

"They turned on each other," Plon added, smirking. "Their pilots bombed their own cities. Pretty soon, they left us alone."

Marianne shook her head, trying not to accept what they were saying. Suddenly, she felt repulsed by them - and yet, underneath that, she was drawn to them, she realised... After all, they were telepaths, like herself. No! She had to resist that; those on Sigma Orionsis had been telepaths too, hadn't they? "Aren't you afraid that they'll develop long range weapons?"

"No - not until recently, that is. You see, we penetrated the heart of their cities, eradicated their war scientists, leaders - eventually, they crawled back into their cities and tried to barricade us out. They lost a lot of their technological expertise and their populations fell drastically through famine and disease. They ceased to exist as nations and the land was divided between us into zones."

"Yes," Lan interjected angrily. "And our leaders grew soft and said, 'Let's spare these pitiful wretches - let's leave them alive to eke out a miserable existence in their filthy warrens'." She looked venomously at Kirk and the others as she spoke.

"You speak as if there's been a reversal," Kirk put in. The telepaths stared at him incredulously; Marianne presumed that they were amazed at his daring. But Savid answered him.

"There has..." He paused to glance at Lan to see if she was disposed to comment further but she had drawn her long knife again and was turning it over in the firelight, studying it. Firelight deeply etched her face, making her eyes unreadable. "For fifty years, we had peace. The dumbs kept to themselves - we believed them completely broken in spirit. But their numbers were slowly increasing and we noticed signs of industrial processes starting up - we didn't realise it at the time but they were armaments and flitter factories, chiefly. Then about five years ago, they started to provoke us -"

"Provoke us!" Lan burst out, unable to restrain herself. "They've always killed the tel children they had - we guessed that, though we used to raid and rescue them if we sensed them. But five years ago, they started staking out the bodies where we could see them."

"Y-you mean, they're having tel children - they're killing their own children?"

"Of course. Dumbs are capable of anything," Meric snapped.

"But - but why should they -"

"Because they know we can't get at them, that's why! They've got a new weapon - a mineral they discovered in one of their areas. They set up a mine and distributed the stuff by flitter - and our leaders let them. Only they didn't

know what the stuff was - telpanite. It blocks telepathic sendings, drains the strength of any tel within a few paces of it. And closer - "Lan stood up and began to pace, her anger too great for her to bear keeping still.

"Telpanite - physical contact with it - is painful to tels. Too long and it sends them mad. The dumbs have headbands now, each with a small piece of this stuff attached. They put a headband on each child as soon as it's born. That way they find out sooner which is tel and kill it," Savid explained, dispassionately.

"That's horrible. Can't you... can't you mind control them, make them stop?" The idea was repugnant to Marianne but she deemed it the lesser of two evils in the circumstances.

"Not with them all protected by telpanite. The stuff projects some kind of field we think - at any rate, it screens any dumb wearing it. We're just lucky its range is limited so we can pick off the dumbs with our guns."

"We're constructing our own flitters in each zone though," put in Plon. "We have other weapons..." His voice trailed off as he realised that Kirk and the others were hearing everything.

"One of our zones was over run when this stuff was first discovered," Dorahi said. "The dumbs built a fleet of flitters and flew over their settlement - bombarded it with telpanite then landed and finished off the survivors."

"That was the zone nearest the mine," added Savid. "Since then, we shoot down any flitter that comes within range. Our people aren't careless anymore. Now, each zone is holding them off... or we were till you got through."

"Which brings us back to the question of where you all come from." Lan rounded on Kirk. "Marianne says you don't come from a zone, that you know nothing of this war so where do you come from?"

"I'm sorry but I'm not at liberty to tell you," Kirk said, quietly but firmly. Lan stared at him, her face stony.

"You will tell us, if we have to tear apart your mind - and the minds of your friends - to get at the truth. You gain nothing but pain by defying us."

"I still can't tell you - " Kirk broke off, gasping in pain, his eyes widening. Marianne sprang to her feet.

"No, don't! I'll tell you!"

Kirk slumped, gasping for breath. McCoy supported him, his eyes blazing in fury at Lan who merely looked at him, unmoved. "Ensign... I order... you... not to break General Order Number... One..."

"Captain, I - I'm sorry. What can I do? What's the point in you all suffering when I can tell them - they'll get the truth anyway!" Marianne cried in anguish.

"You swore an oath, Marianne," Kirk said, recovering. She couldn't meet his eyes, turning away as her own filled with tears.

"You should thank her, dumb, for sparing you pain," Lan commented, then ordered, "All right, tie them up."

As the others were secured with ropes, bound hand and foot, Marianne went over to the other side of the camp and flopped to the ground against the trunk of a gnarled old tree, trying to get control of her emotions. She started as she felt Savid's hand on her shoulder.

"It's all right, they won't be harmed. Though I don't understand how a tel can feel concern for dumbs." When Marianne tried to speak, he shook his head. "Words are a poor means to communicate. You can meld with us."

"But I can't - I've already told you - "

"It's all right, don't be afraid. We'll help you - take you through it. Marianne, we have to - it's not that we don't trust you but we'll need to understand, to see everything, if we're to put your case to our people. You do see that?"

Reluctantly, she nodded. "Yes... yes, I suppose so." She got to her feet and went back to the campfire. Kirk was looking at her; she saw a sadness in his face and realised it was for her: if they ever escaped back to the Enterprise, her career would be at an end.

"Ensign, I appeal to you. You may think you know what you're doing but you're not qualified to judge the effect

this may have on them." He looked at Savid. "We didn't come here to harm your people; we know nothing about the conflict here. We wish only to leave you in peace."

"That is not something to be judged by a few," Lan put in. "Everyone must decide. And we must meld with her to ensure that you have no hold upon her." She turned to Plon. "Tell Bjen we meld; he must stay alert." As the young man nodded and left the clearing, the others seated themselves in a circle, not far from the fire. Reluctantly, Marianne joined them and Plon returned to take the empty place left for him. They joined hands. Lan smiled at Marianne. "Don't be afraid. We'll make this easy for you." Marianne nodded, her throat too dry to speak, and closed her eyes.

While the six figures sat motionless, hardly breathing, Kirk fretted. Efforts to get free of his bonds had proved fruitless. "Can any of the rest of you get free?" A chorus of 'No, sir's was his only reply.

"Jim, she didn't have much choice," McCoy said, quietly.

"That argument won't wash with Starfleet, Bones. Besides, it's a mind meld - she won't be able to hide anything."

"Jim?" McCoy frowned. "Are you thinking of the persecution of the Mardrata on Earth?"

"Yes, Bones. What chance will we have now of winning their confidence? Not only will they know all about the Federation, they'll have a biased view of it."

"I see what you mean. That'd fit it too easily with their perception of non-telepaths as non-people."

Kirk nodded. "I admit they have justification for that, from what we've heard, but there were atrocities on both sides. I wouldn't mind hearing the non-telepaths' side of the argument: at least they wouldn't dismiss us at the outset."

There was a stir among the silent circle: eyelids blinked, hands unlinked, the telepaths came to life again.

"All of space, so many worlds, races..." Savid sounded awed, astounded.

"They persecuted you... for centuries... and yet they gave you a planet," Plon remarked, in astonishment.

"Guilt - must be," Lan replied. "And wanting them out of the way. A more permanent version of our zones."

"But the zones are for our protection," Savid argued. "This is different. A whole planet - free from dums - free from persecution." He stood, helping Marianne to her feet; she was even paler than usual, and a little shaky. She met Kirk's eyes for a moment, then looked away, ashamed.

"Captain, I... I had to. I couldn't hide it..."

Lan placed an arm protectively round her. "We won't let them harm you." She faced Kirk, her features shadowed and grim in the firelight. "We claim the right to join your Federation. Either help us against the dums or give us a planet of our own."

Kirk shook his head, regretfully. "I'm sorry. I just don't have that power. Your world isn't ready for contact with space-faring races -"

"And never will be, thanks to your kind!" snapped Plon. "How can we develop that kind of technology when we're fighting for our lives?"

"Captain, I'm sorry," Marianne blurted, near tears. "I'm sorry if you'll be in trouble with Starfleet over this. I know my career's finished anyway. But... some things are more important."

Gently, Kirk said, "Marianne, I do understand. But I can't condone it, even so."

Savid laid a hand protectively on Marianne's shoulder. "Don't worry; tomorrow we'll be back at Homebase." He smiled at her. "You know, you don't have to go back to their punishments. You're very welcome to stay here, with us."

"Thank you, but... well, my family's on Mardrata-va."

Savid nodded. "It must be wonderful... a world without dums." He led her away from Kirk and the others to the

opposite side of the fire. Lan was squatting beside it tossing twigs into the flames.

"Wonderful... and strange too, Savid." She looked at Marianne. "Those other Mardrata - the non telepaths - they're like dumbs yet still your people."

Marianne sensed that the other woman was attempting to ease her anguish by steering the conversation onto more abstract areas. Gratefully, she replied, "It's our fault really - for splitting into factions and allowing ourselves to lose our other talents. The Casreem don't regard the others as dumbs."

"No. No, of course not," Savid agreed. "The real distinction about dumbs is that they hate anyone different, whereas your people have stuck together despite the persecution, the living in hiding." He rubbed the back of his neck, easing tension. "Eight thousand years," he said, with a note of awe in his voice. "We couldn't even manage thirty."

There were grimaces from his companions: their memories were too bitter for anything else.

"Our circumstances were very different," Marianne replied. "There were few of us, and we had continuity - children were taught how to hide their abilities by their parents. And we only went into hiding gradually." Behind her words lay the experience of the Mardrata on Earth: first living as nomads, their 'magic' powers accepted by Humans who believed magic to be something that helped the tribe. But with the growing complexity of Human societies, Humans came to regard all magic as black magic - the wielding of power over others - and thus came to fear it.

"I think we can learn a lot from your example," Savid agreed. "Despite your success in 'fitting in', you allowed your talents to become split and intergroup rivalry to set in."

"And when you were no longer able to protect each other," Lan continued, "you became vulnerable to persecution." She looked round at the others. "We must never allow ourselves to be divided." There were murmurs of agreement.

Watching them, Marianne was profoundly aware of the warmth and companionship between them - something they had tried to extend to her, also. Yet, here too, she felt excluded; she did not belong. Despite the affinity for like to like, she had other loyalties. Besides, they were complete without her, did not need her: Lan, decision maker, Savid, the thinker, Meric, the healer, Plon, the most skilled hunter in the group, Dorabi, weapons technician, and Bjén the scout. All their people were organised like this, into cells: their response to a now permanent war-footing. She had no place here - and she had a duty to those whom she had betrayed.

"What - what happens in the morning?"

"We'll rendezvous with our relief cell and return to Homebase," Lan said, eyeing Marianne shrewdly. "If you're concerned about your... colleagues, well, their case will be presented by us in a mass meld and then put to the vote. I have to warn you, though. Even though these dumbs aren't involved, many of our people will condemn them from hatred: we have suffered a lot, and they will say what is to stop these people offering their technology to the dumbs here. After all, it's natural that they should side with their own kind."

"The non-interference directive works both ways," put in Kirk. "We won't help the non telepaths against you."

Lan gazed levelly at him. "I can believe that - intellectually - but I find it hard to accept emotionally. The vote will decide."

Marianne caught at her arm. "If you gave back their communicators, they would go in peace," she said, eagerly.

"I'm sorry, but we can't allow that."

Marianne turned to Savid in appeal but he shrugged his shoulders. "Lan's is the final word." Hopelessly, she could only nod.

It was getting late, and the telepaths made preparations for sleep, producing blankets from their backpacks. One was handed to Marianne and she lay down, wrapping it around herself, and tried to relax. Soon, the telepaths were rolled up in their blankets by the steadily burning fire, with the exception of Meric who had taken first watch, Bjén returning to the camp to sleep. Marianne watched the slowly pacing figure, his shoulders hunched beneath the blanket wrapped about his shoulders: the air had cooled considerably. No blanket had been spared for Kirk and the others, who were forced to sit in a huddle to keep warm, still bound hand and foot.

Marianne could not sleep, turning over the problem in her mind. She could not let the Captain and the others go to an almost certain death: she sensed them, waiting for her to help them.

The fire died down a little; Meric approached to throw on a few twigs from the pile beside it collected earlier. As he fed the new wood in and straightened up, Marianne, who had quickly closed her eyes and shammed sleep as he came over, slipped from her blanket and stood up behind him. Her heart beat rapidly as she attempted to recall her combat training. As her arm came up, he swung round, pulling a pistol from his belt.

WHAT ARE YOU DOING?

His thoughts blared angrily at her mind. Wincing she staggered back then, slammed a command at him. *Drop the gun.* She felt his barrier crumble: gasping, he let the weapon thud to the ground. Desperate to prevent him warning the others, she willed, as strongly as she could *Sleep! Do not wake until morning.*

Meric crumpled slowly, as if frozen in time. Almost mesmerised, she watched him, then snapped out of it in time to catch him. She lowered him to the ground and felt for the sheath at his belt: yes, she had thought so - they all carried knives. Drawing the blade, she crept between the sleeping figures over to where Kirk and the others waited.

As soon as she had cut his bonds, Kirk rose and promptly glided over to the tree where the backpacks had been propped. Near panic, Marianne suddenly realised that he was retrieving their equipment; of course, she had done enough damage already without these people being left free to copy such advanced technology. But she no longer felt guilty that she had shown them the truth: after all, why shouldn't they know there was something more to existence than hatred, killing, a desperate struggle for survival? They knew now that others like them had prospered; it would give them hope.

Kirk crept back, clutching one of the landing party's cloth bags to his chest to minimise any clanking of the metal objects within. Together, the party left the camp, stifling their groans of pain at the sudden exercise of muscles cramped by forced immobility. They trod as quietly as they could over the carpet of fallen leaves, still undecayed from previous autumns, not speaking until they were far from camp. At last, the ground underfoot began to slope downwards; Marianne guessed they were not far from the beam down point. Kirk's voice spoke quietly beside her. "Well done, Ensign."

"Th-thank you, sir." Belatedly, Marianne realised that her action would count as partial mitigation at whatever disciplinary proceedings awaited her. It was suddenly important that he should know that hadn't been the motive. "I - I didn't do it to - to try to get off -"

"I know, Ensign." There were sounds of rustling as Kirk felt for a communicator inside the bag he held: the darkness was total under the trees.

A shot rang out, deafening in the silence. There was a grunt of pain.

"Jim!" McCoy's voice was raised in alarm. More shots rang out, crimson flashes in the darkness below. Someone pushed Marianne to the ground. There were yells, not far off; screams of pain and ferocious battlecries designed to unnerve opponents. Marianne spat out dirt and heard McCoy's voice in the darkness.

"Jim... What is it?"

"My shoulder, Bones... must be a bullet." The Captain's voice was steady but Marianne detected the undertone of suppressed pain.

"Hold it right there!"

The harsh voice took her by surprise; she looked up, only to be dazzled by torchlight streaming into her eyes. Behind the glare she was vaguely aware of figures, their faces fierce and fantastically shadowed by the halo of light from the torch held by one of them. A figure broke away from the group to step forward. "On your feet, filth." His was the voice she had heard before. Rough hands pulled her to her feet: around her, she sensed the others being similarly handled. There was an involuntary groan of pain from Kirk.

"This one's wounded; let's finish him off," suggested another voice.

"No, wait -" McCoy began, but Marianne, seeing the heavy pistol being raised to Kirk's head, had a sudden inspiration.

"He's our leader," she said, quickly. "If you don't harm him, we won't give you any trouble -" The person who was holding her, gave her arm a vicious twist but the hoarse voice of the man who seemed to be in charge, rewarded her effort.

"Leader, eh? All right, Adiek, leave that one alive. He'll have more information than the rest. Now - move!"

A hand planted itself in the small of Marianne's back and pushed. She staggered forward down the slope, caught her foot on a treeroot and sprawled headlong. She cried out in pain as her hair was seized and she was pulled to her feet. "You heard - move."

Before long, the ground was levelling out. They halted in the concealment of a gnarled tree while one of the band scouted the way ahead. The torch was turned off and they waited in silence. Far away, a shot sounded, but most of the earlier fighting had died away. Then a low whistle sounded from up ahead.

"Come on," said a voice close to Marianne's ear, and she was again pushed forward. The darker bulks of the trees were thinning out here: soon, they were left behind all together. Ahead, another shape, hunched and menacing, lurked in readiness. Captors and captives crept quietly toward it.

Suddenly shots rang out, bullets impacting into the ground around their feet. Curses sounded and the band broke into a run, forcing their prisoners along with them, toward the squatting form ahead. Marianne heard a whistle of protesting air, just behind her head: despite the darkness, those shooting at them were obviously getting their range correctly now. Then a scream of pain sounded behind her.

"Who's hit?"

"Never mind, just get him in the transport - quick!"

They reached the vehicle; Marianne was pushed toward it. She grabbed the side and pulled herself up, realising that it was open topped and with only low sides - not much protection against the bullets now whizzing round them. As she swung herself in, the others scrambled after her, pushing her over to the far end, at the rear of the driver's compartment. She heard the cab door slam and the motor roar into life. With a lurch that threw her bruisingly against the side of the transport, they were suddenly in motion.

"Keep down!" the harsh voice ordered. At the same moment, a bullet ricocheted against the side of the transport with a high metallic ringing. With a cry of fear, Marianne snatched her hand away; she had been clinging to the side for support. Somewhere close by, she heard a groan of pain but whether from Kirk or the other injured person, she could not tell. By now the vehicle was lurching so violently over the rough ground that it was all she could do to keep down the stem she had eaten so recently.

At last they were leaving the gunfire behind. The transport slowed a little as it entered a rubble strewn area and was forced to detour around piles of masonry. Soon, dark shapes loomed up, hemming them in, but lights also appeared, strung between tall poles. These people evidently had at least one generator. The lights showed crumbling walls, glassless windows black and ominous.

"Take a good look, tels. The ruins of the city you destroyed. But we'll be clearing these soon - building our new city. And you can't stop us." The harsh voiced man tapped the headband he wore: Marianne saw light glinting on the small stone woven into it. Telpanite. The man himself was bearded and stockily built; across his shoulders was strung a belt of ammunition. She looked round at the others, trying not to flinch at the unwavering hostility she saw in their eyes. Their faces were scarred, wrinkled by the sun, scoured by hardship. Their dishevelled, shoulder length hair was confined by protective headbands. She switched her gaze to Kirk who lay on the floor of the transport, blood showing darkly on his shoulder and chest, his head cradled on McCoy's knees. Unconscious or dead? Marianne couldn't tell without a tentative mind touch and was reluctant to chance even that. Though the vehicle had slowed considerably, she still felt nauseous and was beginning to suspect that proximity to the telpanite in those headbands had something to do with it.

"How's Xunuck?" the leader asked. Another man was bending over the limp body his head pressed against the chest. He sat up, shaking his head.

"Dead."

There was muttering at this, the band staring with hatred at Marianne and the others. "Filthy tels," one said. "You'll pay for this when Gevron gets through with you." Chuckles met his words.

At last, the transport rolled into a more open area: evidently, the ruins here had been cleared away. A short distance away was a high wall, topped by electric lights. There was a shout from a figure atop it. "They're back!" A door in the wall began to swing back with much groaning of hinges.

"I told them to oil those yesterday: Gevron'll have their guts if he hears it." The leader looked round at the others as he spoke; obediently, they laughed softly. Then the vehicle was rolling through the gap in the wall, and into a courtyard beyond. The engine died away and the driver climbed out. "Well driven, First," the leader said, earning a grin from his subordinate. A group of men came forward.

"How did it go, Pranok?"

The leader gestured toward the prisoners. "See for yourself." The other man grinned, delightedly.

The men began to clamber to their feet, roughly pushing the prisoners before them. Marianne began to climb down but a foot sent her tumbling to the cracked paving stones below. Coarse laughter rang out, rebounding from the walls around, then another foot impacted with her ribs. "Get up." Feeling more sick than ever, she struggled to her feet and clung to the side of the vehicle for support. The others joined her, herded together, McCoy and Goertz supporting Kirk who moaned softly as they helped him down. By now more figures were running into the courtyard from an alley at the far end, having heard the news. Their faces crowded in on Marianne, then swam blurrily away. She promptly doubled over, retching in the shadow of the vehicle. Dimly, through tears, she heard Pranok's voice raised above the growing noise of the crowd.

"Hold it! We're taking them to Gevron; you'll have your fun with them later." He ordered his men to form a cordon around the prisoners. "Come on, tel." He pushed Marianne over with the others. Then his men began to force a path through the mass of bodies now pressing in, jeering and spitting at the prisoners.

Disoriented, Marianne raised her head in time to see that they were inside one of the buildings she had vaguely noticed before. A door closed behind them to cut off most of the noise. Shielding her eyes against the glare of a single electric bulb that hung from the ceiling, she looked round the room. It was small and plainly furnished; a narrow bed in the corner, a group of chairs opposite and, in the centre, a desk. The man behind it drew her attention. He was lean, almost gaunt in appearance, and - oddly, in this company - cleanshaven. But his skin was as tanned as that of the other men standing around and his eyes held the same implacable hatred. Strange eyes though... ice blue, almost washed of colour. And his hair was fair; bleached nearly white by the sun. By any standards, he was a striking figure.

"Well, Pranok, I didn't expect success like this when I sent you out." His hands were steepled beneath his chin as he gazed at the brawny band leader. Pranok stood a little apart from the rest, his fingers hooked in his leather belt, confident, secure... but inwardly a little uneasy, thought Marianne. "Yes," the blond man continued. "A few kills I expected, but never thought you'd be lucky enough to catch a whole group of them. Well done."

Pranok smiled, looking round at the others, accepting his superior's thanks on behalf of them all. "To tell you the truth, Gevron, I didn't think we'd be so lucky either. We didn't get far across the border before we ran into 'em. I thought it best to bring them back rather than press on - especially since it sounded as if Jaeroc's group were having trouble."

"Yes, they're not back yet," Gevron informed them. He looked along the line of prisoners; Marianne shivered as the pale eyes met hers for a moment before passing on. "Have you had a chance to question them yet?"

"No, they were firing at us all the way to the border."

Gevron nodded, the small blue stone set in his headband flashing in the overhead light. "All right, we'll begin now. Secure them."

"Adlek, fetch rope," Pranok commanded. The other nodded and went outside. For a moment, the voices of the crowd swelled in volume then subsided again as the door closed.

"This man needs medical attention - I'm a doctor, a healer -" McCoy began. One of the men behind him unlimbered the rifle from his shoulder and raised it to strike McCoy with the butt but Gevron held up his hand and the man stepped back.

"You will be silent," Gevron said. "Until it is time for you to answer our questions."

"The wounded one's their leader," Pranok put in.

"Indeed?" Gevron eyed Kirk's slumped form speculatively. The Captain straightened himself with an effort, his hand pressed against the shoulder wound from which blood still sluggishly ran. Then the door reopened and Adlek returned with some lengths of rope. The landing party were seized, their arms pulled behind them and tied. Kirk's face

tightened as his arms were jerked back but he made no sound, knowing it unwise to show weakness again. Fresh blood flowed from the wound which had been reopened. Pale, Kirk fought his weakness and the trauma due to pain and loss of blood.

"We're not the people you want - "

"Silence! You have been told once; you will only speak to answer my questions." Gevron picked up a piece of stone from his desk, a little larger than those worn in the headbands. "You know what this is don't you?" They remained silent. "I advise you to answer my questions - or I will use this. Remember that."

Marianne fought to remain on her feet, feeling weaker by the moment.

The man grinned showing stained teeth, then held out the stone to Pranok. "Let them study it more closely."

Chuckling, Pranok hefted the stone and moved to Lennard, since the security guard was nearest him. He placed it against Lennard's forehead, waiting with an expectant sneer.

The expected reaction did not come: Pranok stepped back in amazement, then turned to Gevron in consternation. "He's not a tel - he's a norm!"

"Check the others."

Quickly, Pranok moved along the line, pressing the stone to the forehead of each prisoner, drawing closer to Marianne on the far end. "They're all norm!" he said, shocked. As he reached Marianne, she took an involuntary step backwards. "Hold her!" he snapped. Rough hands seized Marianne's bound arms. Still she struggled to escape, tossing her head from side to side as she sensed the deadly radiation coming closer. Pranok's hand shot out to grasp a handful of her long dark hair, confining her. Then the blue stone was pressed to her forehead.

Firey agony lanced into her brain. Screaming, she collapsed to her knees as the man behind let her go. Laughter echoed round the room.

"All right, release the others," Gevron ordered. As Kirk's bonds were cut, he began to move toward her but his weakness overcame him. McCoy caught him just in time.

"These men and the brown haired woman are our brothers and sister," Gevron announced. "Conduct them to the spare quarters and fetch whatever the healer needs to tend his commander. When they have rested and eaten, we shall talk."

"There's some medicine in a pouch. Your men have it," McCoy put in.

Gevron looked expectantly to Pranok.

"It's in the transport - a bag of their stuff," he said, gesturing to one of the others to fetch it. As the door opened again, they could hear the sound of weeping above the other noises of the crown. "Xunuck's woman."

"He will be avenged," Gevron answered, staring at Marianne's kneeling figure. She was rocking back and forth on her heels, moaning. The door opened again and the man returned, handing over a sack to Gevron. He slowly took out all the equipment. "Is this your medicine?" he asked, holding out the medi-kit. Nodding, McCoy took it with relief.

"May we have our other things please," he began, as Gevron stowed them away in the sack again.

"I shall study them first," the other replied flatly. "We'll speak again when you've eaten and tended your leader's wound. Pranok, see that they are given new headbands."

"The girl... She's no threat to you," Kirk began, carefully. "She doesn't belong to the people in the forest..."

Gevron stared at Kirk, then looked at McCoy. "His wound may be infected, healer: he is obviously delirious. Tend him well." He nodded, evidently dismissing them, an impression confirmed when Pranok opened the door. Angry murmurs from outside rose in volume but he stepped out first, raising his hands.

"Be at peace, brothers. These people are norms!" The noises died away to be replaced by confused muttering. "Heed me! They are norms, prisoners of the tels. But we have one tel - a woman." A roar of approval sounded. "Clear a path for our new friends. Clear a path."

Inside, the landing party were being herded toward the door. McCoy looked back at Marianne, who was now shivering as if feverish. "What are you going to do with her?"

Gevron smiled. "Do not fear, healer. She will be well tended." Then the door closed and McCoy and the others were moving slowly through the now subdued crowd toward another building.

McCoy secured the bandage on Kirk's shoulder and turned to wash his hands in a bowl of water on the table. "You were lucky, Jim; you escaped with a flesh wound. Another couple of centimetres and that could have shattered the bone." Kirk began to ease his tunic on onehandedly, wincing a little, despite the painkiller McCoy had given him. "Here, let me help you with that." McCoy retied the fastenings of the Captain's coarse wollen tunic. "It should heal cleanly now, Jim, though I'd be happier if we could manage a blood transfusion."

"Thanks, Bones." Kirk got to his feet and paced over to the window, peering through a gap in the wooden shutters. The courtyard area outside was now deserted, the people having been ordered to disperse to their homes. The only illumination was provided by the subdued glow of the bulbs along the defensive wall and the chink of brighter light streaming out around the door of Gevron's office. "I don't like it, Bones. With the attitudes here, they're capable of doing anything to her."

"She's got command training, sir," put in Goertz, diffidently.

"But she's betrayed us already," Demetz added. "To her pals."

"That's enough, Lieutenant." Kirk swung away from the window, his face grim. "If you speak like that about a fellow officer again, I'll put you on report."

"Sorry, sir," Demetz mumbled. There was an uneasy silence, then a soft tapping at the door startled them. After a moment, Kirk responded. "Come." The door opened and Ensign Lennards slipped inside.

"There was a pile of refuse round the side of the building, sir. I buried the food in that. I didn't see anyone."

Kirk nodded. "Good." It would take a lot of explaining to their hosts that his party had already eaten - in an enemy campsite. Besides, they did not want to risk contamination by alien micro-organisms, being unable to check the food. Luckily, the water had been rendered safe by a couple of purifier tablets from McCoy's medi-kit.

A second knock on the door made them freeze momentarily then Kirk nodded to McCoy who was nearest the door, and the Doctor opened it.

Pranok entered. "Gevron will see you now - your leader and the healer. The rest may sleep; bunks are in the next room."

"Thank you; you've been most hospitable," Kirk replied, smiling. His fertile brain had suddenly formulated an idea that might yet save Marianne. But he had to win their confidence.

"You are norms: we would do this for any of our brothers and sisters," Pranok said, standing aside to allow them to step past him. Mentally girding himself for battle, Kirk went out into the cool evening air.

Suppressing a sigh, Spock opened his eyes and uncoiled himself from his cross legged position, rising to his feet. Unusually for him, he had been unable to surrender his conscious mind to the disciplines of Vulcan meditation. He went over to the bed to lie down and think. What could be preventing proper relaxation? Nothing he could detect in his own thoughts: no undesirable trace of emotional contamination, no unsolved problem of complexity to demand an answer. And yet... A vague anxiety clung tenaciously to his thoughts: was the Captain in danger?

It was completely illogical, of course. There was no empirical evidence whatsoever on which to base a reasonable doubt to Kirk's safety. But it had been demonstrated in the past that they possessed some kind of tenuous awareness - perhaps even a link - probably a legacy of so many mind melds. If so, his concern could be logical after all. In any event, it would do no harm to gather extra data.

He swung his legs off the bed, refusing to examine the sensation of relief his decision had engendered, and got up to call the bridge. But then he halted: the planet's inhabitants were physically similar to Humans and it would be

difficult to distinguish them from most of the landing party. Ensign Raesdal's readings however, should be quite distinctive - but the fact of her different physiology was classified and the knowledge restricted to the four senior officers. Accordingly, the science officer on duty could not be asked to scan for her.

Moving swiftly, Spock removed the Vulcan robe he wore and began to don his uniform. He would have to make the sensor scan himself. He did not stop to consider the sense of urgency that now possessed him as he almost tore from his room and headed for the nearest turbolift. It was fortunate that there were no crew about on his route to the bridge to see their normally unflappable First Officer so uncharacteristically ruffled.

"Co-operate and we'll give you a quick death." The voice, so cold and reasonable, somehow penetrated the haze of red pain and sent a chill down Marianne's spine. She lay still beneath Gevron's boot, breathing shallowly in an attempt to lessen the pain that stabbed through her side. She felt something trickle down the side of her face; realised it was her own blood. Then the boot was removed and rough hands pulled her to her feet. She gasped as a stab of agony lanced through her side.

"In pain, tel? It will grow worse. And there is always the telpanite again." Gevron paused to let the threat sink in. "How are you organised? What are your leaders planning?"

"I - I've told you al - already. I don't know anything. The others brought me from far - far away - aaagh!" She doubled over, prevented from falling by Pranok's broad fingers that dug painfully into her upper arm.

"Be sensible... Speak." Gevron forced up her head and laid the tip of a phaser against her temple. "What would happen if I pressed this control?"

"Go ahead and find out - "

Gevron hit her brutally across the face. Tears started from her eyes again and she bit her lip to hold back sobs. Gevron lowered the phaser. "No. Whatever this weapon does, it would be too quick, undoubtedly. I have a public entertainment in mind for you." He grinned at Pranok. Marianne smelled his stale breath. "What did we do with the last one we caught, Pranok?"

"The boy, wasn't it? We burned him in the great square."

"Oh, yes. Made quite a spectacle, didn't it? Yes, we must stage something equally impressive for you, girl. After all, since we found telpanite, none of you have been obliging enough to leave your Zones. Yes, the last one would be five years ago when we first got the telpanite. That boy didn't know about it, did he, Pranok? I'll always remember his face - the look on it when he realised that he couldn't control any of us." Both men chuckled. "No, I'll have to give your death some consideration." He turned away to his desk. "Put her in the cage, Pranok. She'll keep till morning." He took a headband from the desk. "And put this on her. Gag her too - we don't want her keeping us awake all night. When you've done that, fetch the norms we rescued - their leader and the healer, in case the man is still sick."

Pranok nodded, taking the headband, and began manhandling Marianne out of the door. Just one touch of the telpanite had been agony: if she was forced to wear it for hours she felt she would go mad. But her hands were tied behind her still and she was too weak from the beatings to put up much of a struggle. Her only consolation was that she had not betrayed Kirk and the others nor the telepaths she had met: in the meld they had shared, she had seen the plans that Plon had nearly let slip verbally. The tels in all zones were hard at work on constructing flitters and explosives more powerful than ever before. When the time was right - and she knew that would be soon - they would launch an all out attack on the telpanite mine and the settlement of dumbs that ran it, and then follow up this psychological blow with firebomb assaults on the cities. Any dumb survivors would be wiped out by mass landings of crack troops. To say anything now would alert the dumbs who had their own weapons in production: at least, she told herself, one side would survive this way and since the tels were the next evolutionary step on this planet, it should be them.

Pranok halted and pushed open a door shoving Marianne into a dark interior. She stumbled but, held up by the burly band chief, did not fall. Then she heard a clanging as if a key was shoved into a lock and turned. There was a stale, sour smell around her.

Without warning, Pranok pushed her forward. She landed heavily on a straw covered floor, crying out as the cracked rib jabbed into her lung. "Shut up." A gag was thrust into her mouth and tied tightly behind her head. Pranok chuckled. "You'll have something to scream about now - but we won't have to listen." She felt him slipping something over her head, felt the beginnings of pain prickle inside her skull as the telpanite came nearer. She tried to plead,

to beg, but the gag muffled her outcries. She saw Pranok's outline against the dim glow filtering in through the open door behind him. There were other outlines - vertical - bars, she realised. She was to be kept inside a cage like an animal in an old time zoo. Then the telpanite was placed against her forehead and coherent thought ceased. She fell back, tossing her head in agony against the damp straw. She did not hear Pranok's laugh nor the key turning in the lock imprisoning her. Nor did she hear the outer door slam shut. There was only the fire in her brain and nothing more.

"Come in, come in," Gevron said with a geniality that Kirk did not believe came naturally to the man. "Please sit down." He indicated two chairs before the desk and Kirk and McCoy sat down. "Firstly, we have not exchanged names. You have probably guessed I am City Governor Gevron. You are - ?"

"Kirk - and this is Doctor McCoy." Kirk concentrated on projecting an image of self assurance and open friendliness.

Gevron nodded. "Yes. I trust that you are now recovered?"

"Thank you, yes. You've treated us very kindly."

"Not at all. We would do the same for any norm needing our help. You were... captured by the tels?"

Here we go, thought Kirk. Gevron was obviously a little doubtful about them; he had to lull that curiosity. "Yes, we're unfamiliar with the area - strayed too close to their border and they jumped us."

Gevron nodded. "The tel girl who was with you - she was one of them, I take it?"

"No, she's my slave. She got us out -"

"Slave?" Gevron demanded, his icy blue eyes piercing Kirk who was beginning to have a mild headache.

With his most innocent expression, Kirk replied, half smiling, "Why, yes. We have a number of them - for the heavy work, you understand. Some of it involves exposure to unhealthy conditions so we'd rather not risk our own people."

"You use tels as slaves? How?" demanded Gevron.

"How? I don't understand -" Kirk gave a perfect imitation of someone asked how water was wet or any other perfectly self evident truth.

"How do you keep control of them? How do you keep them from plotting against you?"

"Well, they're always chained, of course. And any disobedience is severely punished, naturally. And we have the same blue stone you have here, of course. We're all safe guarded against their powers and they're too closely guarded to give us trouble."

Gevron shook his head in bewilderment. "I don't understand this. Tels as slaves? Where do you come from?"

"We live among the mountains... far to the west. Over two weeks by transport vehicle. We're isolated; we've got no contact with the outside. So, finally, we decided to send expeditionary parties out to try to make contact." Kirk was relying on his memory of the planet's terrain: the mountains had shown no sign of humanoid habitation whatsoever.

"No contact? But - but what about radio?"

"Oh, our scientists have tried to redevelop something like that but it was impossible. They think it might be something to do with mineral deposits among the mountains - too much interference."

"I see. What happened to your vehicle?"

"Broke down; we had to abandon it," McCoy put in, thinking it would look odd if he said nothing. "We continued on foot but the tels picked us up."

"Yes, they took our headbands - buried them somewhere. Then they mind-probed us. I think they were going to take us to their base in the morning but my slave overpowered their sentry and freed us. We were running away when your men picked us up."

"Yes, you talk of this slave again - helping you. Why should a tel act against her own kind?"

"When our teams were formed, we each picked out a tel who had at least one other relation. This one has a brother - she knows that if we don't return within three months, he'll be killed." Kirk leaned forward and picked up the loose bit of telpanite from Gevron's desk. "We use this stuff on them. They're more scared of this than anything; I think you call it - telpanite? We call it... Spockel, after its discoverer." He sensed McCoy nearly splutter beside him and stood on the doctor's foot, relieved to hear him disguise his reaction as a cough. He didn't want Gevron asking how an isolated group would know the correct name of a mineral so recently discovered.

Gevron was nodding. "Yes, I see. But how do you stop them becoming too numerous?"

"Oh, we've developed a medical technique," McCoy put in quickly. "We can sterilise them; we only keep the strongest and fittest for breeding. That way we maintain a small herd without becoming outnumbered." Kirk could detect the distaste underlying McCoy's words but Gevron appeared to be completely fooled.

"A marvellous idea... We have several tels born to our own women every year. If we used them as work animals... Yes, we have a grave shortage of labourers with all our young and fit men out on patrol. And now we are embarking on clearance of the ruins... Yes, we know that telpanite drains their power even over a few paces distance... without causing pain. So, if we put telpanite necklaces on them, fixed pieces of it in the walls of their compounds... yes, it is feasible." The fair haired man spoke with growing enthusiasm.

Kirk shrugged, then winced as his injured shoulder hurt him. "It's how we do it, anyway."

Gevron seemed alight now with excitement. "Yes, this could revolutionise our war effort, speed up our plans against the tels. The people will have to be won over first, of course, but - " He stopped and turned to Pranok who had been standing behind his chair in silence during the whole exchange. "Go to Kirk's slave; remove her headband." Pranok nodded and went outside, while the Governor beamed benevolently at Kirk. "I'm afraid we damaged her a little; we thought her merely a prisoner of war. If I'd known she was your property..." he trailed off, apologetically.

"Of course, we didn't realise: if we'd known you had no slaves of your own, we'd have told you," Kirk answered. The headache had settled into a low level ache just behind the piece of telpanite in his headband: perhaps he had a trace of psychic ability himself? After all, he had had a few occasions in the past when there had seemed to be almost a link with Spock. He brushed the thought away to concentrate on the present; he hoped Marianne was not too badly injured. At least he had saved her from one thing; he remembered what Savid had told them about the effect of prolonged physical contact of telpanite on telepaths. From Gevron's order just now, they had obviously put a headband on her. Such deliberate cruelty sickened him.

"Ensign Goertz, wake up."

The softly spoken but urgent command roused the historian. With a start, he sat up but before he could cry out in alarm, he caught the outline of one elegantly swept back ear in the dim light from the open shutter. "Mr. Spock, sir?"

"Yes, Ensign. Please awaken the others - quietly." The Vulcan glided away to close the shutter.

Moments later, the landing party was grouped in the centre of the room in almost pitch darkness. Spock listened as Ensign Jefferies recounted what had happened in whispers. Spock experienced a familiar sinking sensation in his stomach as she mentioned the Captain's injury and was relieved to hear that McCoy had managed to tend it and give him painkillers. "Then they were sent for, sir - about half an hour ago."

"All right, Ensign." Spock felt for his communicator. "You and Ensign Goertz are to return to the ship. Lieutenant Demetz, you and Ensign Lennards will come with me."

In moments, he had contacted the ship and instructed them to beam up the two Ensigns and beam down phasers for the two security men. That done, he crept to the door and peered out cautiously. The courtyard was clear. All three emerged, and began to run as quietly as they could toward the office which still spilled light out onto the cracked paving stones underfoot.

Footsteps sounded behind them: instantly, Spock spun, the two security men a moment behind him. A man had stopped dead at sight of them; then he grabbed for the rifle slung over his shoulder. Spock's phaser beam stabbed out. The man fell.

"As you can see, it's all here." Gevron finished upending the bag and its contents onto the table. "I've only examined these things cursorily but, as far as I can gather, there's a lot here that our scientists would be interested to see." He smiled benignly as Kirk carefully replaced each item in the sack, mentally checking it off against the inventory of equipment that they had brought with them. "Naturally, we would like to discuss this with your own rulers so I'm returning them to you as a gesture of good will."

Kirk smiled over gritted teeth: despite his tolerance and respect for other cultures, it was impossible to like this man with the gleam of greed in his ice blue eyes. He was the great white shark; they were the defenceless fish hoping that he would not dart in to rend them in his terrifying, machine-like jaws.

"Of course, your technology is greatly advanced compared to ours - as far as my meagre knowledge allows. I leave these things to the scientists." His gaze fell on the communicator that Kirk was stowing inside the bag and Kirk's heart momentarily dropped; what if he was just toying with them, had in fact tried one of the communicators and discovered Kirk's tale about lack of radio or similar technology to be a lie? But if he had, the ship would have got a fix on their new position and gathered something was wrong. In any case, perhaps they looked sufficiently like the type one phasers for him to think them all weapons? From what Kirk had seen here, the man would probably have been more interested in torturing Ensign Raesdal than in detailed examination of the equipment. Despite his training that insisted he remain impartial, Kirk could not help but compare the attitudes shown here to those of the telepath group encountered earlier. Although they would have killed the Enterprise party as enemy spies after, if necessary, taking the information from their minds by force, Kirk had not detected the same sadistic undertones in them that he sensed in Gevron and his followers.

"However, there are some areas where you can benefit from our knowledge," the Governor was saying. "Flitters for instance - aerial vehicles," he added, seeing Kirk's assumed expression of puzzlement. "We can fly you back to your settlement. There's a safe aerial corridor that skirts the tel zone so that it won't take you within range of their batteries. I'll accompany you together with our top scientists and we can negotiate favourable agreements for both our peoples."

Kirk felt his heart sink. What was that old time proverb: out of the frying pan...? But if he hadn't made up this cock and bull story in the first place, they probably wouldn't have any future at all. All they had to do was play along with him until it was safe to contact the ship. "You have many scientists?" he prompted.

"Only a small group of self trained men. The tels wiped out our real scientists back in the Great Catastrophe. But we've slowly regained some of the old knowledge. No, Kirk, I'll admit you have much to offer us but we can offer you something too - a communication network of flitters and radio links from here to the other nom settlements. And if you have need of food or raw materials, I'm sure those other cities will pay handsomely in return for some of your weapons and other devices. Mutual aid." He chuckled. "You'll be a great help to us in our all-out offensive we've got planned. Oh, I know you've got your own tel problem under control so you don't know what we face here and in the other settlements. But maybe you have a better idea after tonight, yes? With the help of your people, I think we have an excellent chance of regaining our rightful position: rulers of this planet. And if we decide to spare any of those freaks, it'll be to work for us like yours." His expression of holy zeal bordering on fanaticism sent a shiver down Kirk's spine. Then he stiffened as a familiar noise from the street outside penetrated the room: a phaser being fired.

"What - ?" Gevron pushed back his chair and headed for the door before the other two could move. As he flung it back and stepped outside, Kirk got a glimpse over his shoulder of two men dragging the limp body of a third toward deep shadows on the far side of the square. Then he realised that the Governor was tugging a pistol from his belt. Instantly, he jumped Gevron, pinning his arms to his sides. McCoy quickly disarmed him and Gevron, struggling to free himself, suddenly froze as he caught sight of the gun in the doctor's hand. "If you kill me, you won't get out of here alive."

"Captain, are you all right?" The familiar deep voice spoke from close by. With a sensation of relief, Kirk replied.

"Perfectly, thank you, Mr. Spock. And congratulations on a timely rescue." The Vulcan nodded in acknowledgement. Kirk glanced at the Governor whom he still held securely, suddenly realising that his view of Spock was obscured by the intervening shape of Doctor McCoy. "Now, Gevron, where are you holding the girl - the telepath?"

The Governor only smirked in triumph. "Find her yourself." His expression turned to one of alarm as Kirk snatched the telpanite headband from him. "Wait! What are you doing?"

Kirk did not answer, beginning to gag the Governor with his own headband. "Mr. Spock, will you come over here, please?" he asked casually.

As the Vulcan stepped into full view of Gevron, the light from the open door of the office behind the Governor clearly illuminating Spock's face, Gevron panicked, lunging to get free, but could not break Kirk's hold. As Kirk had hoped, he clearly believed Spock to be a mutant telepath. "Shall I let him read your mind, Governor?"

Gevron shook his head, muffled protests coming from behind the gag.

"Then will you tell us where the girl is?" Gevron nodded his head vigorously. "All right, I'll take off the gag. But if you try to yell for help, you know what he'll do to you." Gevron nodded and Kirk loosened the gag.

"What filthy monsters are you breeding?" The Governor shivered, his face blanched with fright.

"Never mind that. Tell us what we want to know."

"I'll show you," Gevron almost spat out, staring at Spock with obvious terror.

"All right but no tricks. Mr. Spock, there's a bag in the office containing all our equipment. Will you fetch it, please?" They waited until Spock rejoined them, then Kirk released Gevron. "Lead the way, Governor." As they followed him across the paved courtyard, they were rejoined by the two security guards who had hidden Pranok's unconscious form in a doorway. Kirk's hair began to stir on the back of his neck as he realised that Gevron was heading for the mouth of a narrow alleyway, as jet black as space itself. If the Governor was going to try something, it would be in the confines of that alley where they would have to follow him blindly in single file. "Hold it," he ordered and Gevron stopped immediately. "Demetz and Lennards, stay here and stay out of sight. If we're not back in ten minutes, contact the ship and get help. Spock, we'll take our phasers now. All right, Governor, lead on."

They entered the pitch black alley, Kirk's eyes straining to see the Governor's form ahead of him. Suddenly, he heard the Gevron's steps break into a run. As he sprang after him, cursing, he realised what must have happened: the Governor had refixed his headband and believed himself immune from threats against his life - he did not realise Kirk would not shoot him but knew it was dark enough to give him a chance.

A stone wall impacted bruisingly with Kirk's shoulder. Collapsing, he had no time to warn Spock who almost fell over him. Then he heard a startled grunt as McCoy ran into the Vulcan. Somehow, they picked themselves up.

"Captain, there is another wall here, jutting out part way across the alley," Spock's voice was disembodied in the darkness. Then they heard the warble of a tricorder in use. "I have Ensign Raesdal's life readings, Captain." The tricorder screen shed a little illumination, revealing Spock's face and the wall which had brought them up short. The Vulcan rounded it and they followed, Kirk shrugging off McCoy's concerned query about the blow to his already injured shoulder. A yellow light glowed dimly ahead of them in the darkness, too weak to light anything of this new alley bending to the left of the old, but just sufficient to show the small door just beyond it.

"The Ensign is beyond that door, Captain. So is the Governor."

"Right, Spock. Bones, you stay here."

"Nothing doing, Jim. Marianne's probably going to need medical treatment."

"Bones, for all we know, he's got an armoury in there. Stay here and liaise with the others - that's an order, Bones."

Together, he and Spock cautiously approached the door, keeping to the walls on either side, their phasers ready. But nothing stirred as they reached the door. Kirk exchanged glances with Spock in the yellow light then braced himself and kicked open the door.

A voice spoke from inside. "Come in Kirk - and bring that with you." When they did not move, the Governor stepped forward into the light from the bulb outside. His arm was locked around Marianne's neck. "Drop your weapons or I'll kill her. Toss them through the door." Behind him, a heavy key gleamed in the lock of an iron cage; for a moment, Kirk wondered where Gevron had found the key but then realised that, as Governor, he probably had his own keys - especially if he did not fully trust his own men. Reluctantly, Kirk obeyed and Spock did likewise. "That's good. Now... walk slowly back down the alley." Gevron bent, pulling Marianne down with him, and snatched up one of the phasers. She moaned, her eyes half closed, seeming half conscious. He dragged her with him outside.

Then everything happened at once. Marianne's hand reached over her head and yanked at the Governor's headband. The abused fabric parted, the blue stone flashing as it spun to the ground. Simultaneously, Gevron cried out in fear and rage, jerking Marianne's head back to break her neck but a scream of terror burst from his throat and he threw her away from him. As she collapsed to her knees, Gevron spun away falling back against the wall of the alley, his hands clasped to his head. Groaning, his eyes tightly closed, he repeated two words over and over: "My mind... my mind..."

Kirk rushed forward, dropping to his knees beside Marianne. She looked up, her eyes foggily trying to focus on him. "Captain?"

"Yes. It's all right now, you're safe - " He caught her instinctively as she keeled over. Cradling her limp body, he looked up at Gevron who had slumped to his knees also, shaking his head and still groaning. "What's the matter with him, Spock?"

"Ensign Raesdal repulsed him telepathically, Captain." As the Vulcan stepped forward, Gevron shrank away from him.

"Filthy tels! Get away from me!" he screamed, hysterically. Gently, Kirk lifted Marianne in his arms as he stood, turning as footsteps clattered up the alley. To his relief, McCoy's voice spoke from the gloom.

"Jim? What happened?"

"I think Marianne's in a bad way, Bones. You'd better get her to sickbay." Collecting the dropped phasers they hurried back along the alley way to rejoin the others.

Pranok regained consciousness in time to hear the faint echo of a humming sound die away into the night air. Rubbing his head in bewilderment, he turned sharply at the sound of footsteps, gazing anxiously round for his rifle. But it was only the Governor. His relief was shortlived however, when he saw Gevron's wildly staring eyes and the flecks of foam on his lips.

"Where are they? I want the town searched!"

Still befuddled from the after effects of the stun charge, Pranok asked, "Governor? Who - what - "

"Kirk and the others - filthy tel spies. I want them taken alive - " Gevron's hand snatched out before Pranok could react, and tore the headband from his head, ramming it down over his own forehead. Oblivious to Pranok's incredulous stare, he wiped the sweat away from his face, his breathing easier. "That's better. They won't get far; we'll soon show them what happens to tels and their allies. Yes, and we'll soon show their friends in the zones, yes, yes. Organise the search Pranok, right away."

"Yes, Governor." The stocky dark haired man watched as the slighter, pale haired figure walked unsteadily away toward the office. Somehow, Pranok had a strong hunch that they would soon be choosing a new Governor. He grinned to himself as he turned away to hunt for his rifle. Yes, and he had a good idea who that new Governor would be...



Hmm? Just caught myself staring out of the window at those golden fields of grain. Better replay this and see where I was up to - ah, yes.

And that was it really: well, there was only a little more. Doctor McCoy did a good job of patching me up; the physical injuries are all healed now. The psychic ones took a little longer. In fact, they formed my get-out clause. I told you the Captain was a fair man, didn't I? Well, he considered all the points in my favour - the fact that I'd kept my mouth shut under torture, that I'd only saved the tels the bother of reading someone else's mind so that it hadn't made much difference in the long run, that I'd only talked to save the lives of my colleagues - and offered me an escape clause. I think he knew that I'd felt powerfully attracted to the tels, that like had called to like, but that he also realised that the attitude of his own crew toward me had played a part in that. Whether he guessed my real reasons for keeping quiet when Gevron worked me over - to safeguard the tels' plans - I can only wonder. But it wasn't just for that - I was trying to make up for what I'd done earlier, too, trying to keep faith with Starfleet. Well, maybe not with Starfleet... keeping faith with the Captain would be more like it. I think he deserved that much after what I'd done. Of course, we both knew that my reasons... the mitigating circumstances... wouldn't carry much weight with Headquarters' strictly black-and-white picture of the universe. If I'd stayed in the Service, it would have been a courtmartial for sure - there'd been too many witnesses. But I told him I'd already made up my mind, even before he and McCoy came up with my way out - as I saw it, there was a basic lack of compatibility between me and Starfleet.

And so that's how I ended up being invalidated out. It wasn't completely fixed - after that treatment with the telpanite I had psychic wounds that didn't completely heal until I had treatment from a Casreem mental healer when I first came here. But this way, I got a little severance pay - not much because I'd been in the job less than a standard year, after all - but my record's clean which is the important thing. If I ever want a job off Mardrata-va - though I don't feel that's likely at the moment - I won't have any black marks against me.

This place is beautiful. Even before I arrived, when I first knew I'd be coming here, it felt as if a great load had been lifted from my shoulders. Maybe I'm immature... running away from contact with non-Mardratans... well, too bad. I'm happy here - I've even been given a job that makes use of all that Starfleet training: I've been made the resident xenobiologist. I'm hard at work now, recording all the different wild species, their roles in the ecosystem and how they relate to us, and I'm enjoying myself immensely. And I'm living with my family again, and have even got a room to myself so that I can sit here and daydream, staring out of the window. Perfect. I've got everything I want now. I get the odd twinge, now and again; the urge to fly off among the stars, explore new environments, but I can keep that under control. I only have to reflect how it really was. There'll be other Mardratans on starships, people outgoing enough, confident enough, to fit in. I accept now that I'm just not one of them.

Sometimes I think of Lan and the others, locked in a stalemate so far away, caged in by something any Mardratan would dread - a mineral that works against psi energy. But maybe they've broken out of it by now, made their counterstrike. I heard, too, through the grapevine, that their world is being reconsidered vis-a-vis the Prime Directive enforcement. Besides, they may have picked up something useful from me during the meld - some information to help them counteract their disadvantage. I hope so - they deserve a break.

The only thing that does bother me is when I think of those others: the ones whose cruelty exceeded even that of the 'dumbs' who oppose Lan and her people. If they do find the Enterprise, I won't be there to stand up to them. But, as my grandmother says, "that may never happen". I can't live the lives of others for them, after all. I know she's right and yet... the thought of them is like the shadow of a nightmare that never quite goes away...



4 SPINNER OF NIGHTMARES

Sweat trickled down Kirk's face as he clenched his teeth to hold back a cry of pain. The razor sharp edge continued its path across his bare chest, a line of swelling crimson droplets following it. Leaning his head back against the ancient stone wall, he closed his eyes and made no sound as the blade traced a second line parallel to the first. Only the tendons standing sharply out on neck and shoulders told of the silent battle he fought. Another cut and yet another followed - five lines in sequence - then the knife began a vertical cut along the right side of his body. More followed, forming a grid, until his whole body was painted in blood. Now he remembered where and when this had been done to him before.

The woman stepped back to admire her completed handiwork. "You are now marked as the property of Vendasi, animal. Until death, your sole purpose is to entertain us." She smiled cruelly, her dark eyes staring into his and lit with a baleful glow. "And we shall begin now." Silent against the pain, he now cried out in shock as her mind forced its way in, filling his thoughts with images of horror, death, destruction. His crew - his friends - their bodies torn by wild beasts, their backs raw with the blow of whips. Bones - those gentle, healing hands pierced by thorns - Spock - no, they were burning him alive - more - more - he couldn't take it - couldn't - take -

A scream of raw agony tore along his nerves like liquid fire. In a last instant of despair, he knew the voice was his -

The scream echoed in her ears, dying away only slowly into the darkness of the far corners of the room. Horrified, she clasped her hands over her ears. Then her door burst open and the light snapped on, making her cry out in alarm.

"Arwen, Arwen, what is it?"

Half-blinded, she still recognised the concerned voice as being that of her cousin Rosalind. Ros, in whose house she was staying until her own small quarters were ready. She understood suddenly that it had been a dream.

"Oh, Ros, what a nightmare." She rubbed her eyes with the heels of her hands. "It was just... awful," she finished, inadequately.

"It must have been," Rosalind agreed, sitting down on the edge of the bed. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Y-yes, yes, I think I should. It was - oh, it was so vivid, as if it was happening right now - here. I could see Captain Kirk... he was being tortured - a woman was cutting his chest with a knife..." Her voice trailed off as sudden realisation lit her face. "A grid pattern! That's what those people did to him - on Sigma Orionis! Ros, it must be them -"

"Well, there you are," Rosalind commented with relief. "Mind sharing with Marianne, you must've picked up one of her memories -"

Arwen shook her head, frantic with her need to express herself. "No. No, this was different. The woman wasn't the one Marianne met. And Jim was chained to a stone wall. She - she said she was marking him for Vendasi! Then she invaded his mind - filled it with horrible images - his friends, crew, tortured - dead. I saw everything."

Rosalind shivered, drawing her wrap more closely about her shoulders. "No wonder you screamed."

"It was so real though and I still remember every detail. Look!" An image began to form at the foot of the bed of a tall, dark haired woman, clad in a closefitting one piece garment of black, trimmed with silver. Her face was twisted into a smile of pure malice.

"Urgh, it's horrible." Rosalind turned her head away. "Arwen, banish it - quick!"

Arwen laid her hand on her cousin's arm. "Ros, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset you. It's gone now."

Rosalind straightened up, smiling shakily. "It gave me quite a shock, I must admit. She looked so - evil."

Arwen nodded. "That was an exact likeness, Ros. Somehow... I think it was too real to be just a nightmare."

"Oh, come on, Arwen. What else could it have been?"

Arwen paused, gazing earnestly at her cousin. After a moment, she turned away, saying, flatly, "A precog."

"Precog? Oh, Arwen -"

"I'm a quarter precog, after all." Arwen turned back to Rosalind, her face determined.

"I know, but you've never had a precognition - I remember Tasra asking you."

"Oh, but I have. I remember now - I had a very strong feeling that Jim - Captain Kirk - was in danger, last time I was on the Enterprise. And now this. It's got to mean something!" She scrambled out of bed.

"But, Arwen, it's three a.m. -" Rosalind began but she was talking to empty air. Arwen was already hurrying across the settlement in her bare feet and night dress, to the communications room.

"And what, may I ask, was the answer to your enquiry?" Malcolm's voice spoke scornfully.

Arwen did not allow her irritation to show. "That the last reported message from the Enterprise shows her to be carrying out routine mapping procedures in 'her designated quadrant'."

"There you are!" Malcolm announced triumphantly, in a 'told you so' tone of voice.

"That was over ten days ago, our time!" Arwen grated.

"It's all nonsense. You've got nothing but a dream to go on. We all know that you're very friendly with this Human; naturally you're anxious about him." Malcolm's manner implied it was anything but natural.

Arwen flushed angrily at the implication but Tasra quickly stood up. "I'd like to point out that there's no reason why Arwen couldn't have a precognitive dream in view of her ancestry. However," she persisted over Malcolm's attempted

interruption. "It takes years of experience for a full blood Colasarel to distinguish between ordinary dreams and precog ones."

"There! My case rests!" Malcolm declared, sitting down.

"I'm sorry, Arwen, but without further proof we cannot back a vote for action. Even if the dream were true, it's impossible to tell from the little information it gave you when all that will happen." The dark haired Colasarel chief smiled apologetically. Arwen nodded, suppressing a sigh.

"May I speak?" a voice from the back put in.

"Be recognised," Arwen hastily replied before Malcolm could overrule the speaker. She had recognised the voice and, sure enough, it was Marianne who stood, flushed with embarrassment.

"I've distance linked with Captain Kirk before. I can check if he's all right."

"Good idea - " began Arwen but Malcolm interrupted.

"Very well, but after the meeting. Unless the Tithoniél chief has forgotten, we are in the middle of harvesting our first full crop here - our first step on the way to self sufficiency without Humans. We don't know if the weather will stay fine much longer, so let's not imperil that by arguing over whether one of them is alive or dead." There were a few murmurs of agreement.

"Very well," agreed Arwen, heavily, "though I wish it to be noted that the Human we're talking about is the one who was instrumental in getting us this planet in the first place." A shamed silence greeted her words. "All those in favour of ending this meeting, raise your left hand." A forest of hands appeared. "All right, back to the harvest."

Chatting, the Mardrata filed out into the sunshine. Downhearted, Arwen collected her hat and followed, encountering Tasra by the door.

"Please don't be offended by what I said, Arwen. It takes years of training where dreams are concerned."

Arwen shook her head. "I'm not offended." The Colasarel chief smiled then slipped out of the door. Arwen glanced round at the now empty meeting hall, then halted: there was one other person who had hung back. Marianne stepped forward, a hesitant smile on her face.

"If you want me to check now, we could go to my room." Arwen nodded and the two young women walked together in silence to the small home Marianne shared with her grandmother and younger brother. The house was empty: the rest of the family were out helping with the harvest and so they did not speak until they had shut the door of Marianne's room behind them.

"I'm sorry you've had trouble with Malcolm, Arwen."

Arwen smiled. "Oh, he's a sour one all right. Hates Humans and wants to convert the rest of us to his bigotry." She flopped down on a seat by the table, looking out at its view of the fields with their moving figures and the soft burr of mechanical harvesters. "The famous view," she said with a grin and the Casreem woman blushed furiously. "Sorry, I didn't mean to tease you. I know what it must have cost you to make that tape."

"No, it - did me good, really. I only wish - well, there are still some things I can't put into words. Like some of the things I showed you in the meld. I'm not always honest about my own faults."

"Don't worry, none of us really are. There are one or two things I left out of my confession too - things I was ashamed of," Arwen replied, thinking of her first encounter with the men from the Enterprise, and her attempted suicide in the the Vulcan desert. She chuckled at Marianne's raised eyebrows. "Have I shocked you?"

"Not shocked exactly - surprised." Marianne sat down on the bed, moving into a cross legged position. She looked out of the window. "You're right about Malcolm, though. He conveniently managed to forget that we owe this harvest to the Humans - as well as the other races in Starfleet. Even the seeds were given to us."

"Well, I'm not really worried about him; he's a nuisance but I can learn to live with that. It's this dream I'm concerned about. Look, I know this must be a strain to you - I'm sorry to put it onto you."

Marianne shook her head. "It's all right; it's not like the last time. I'm rested and relaxed - and I've had

extra psychic experience. Don't worry." She closed her eyes and slipped into trance. Arwen waited with enforced patience, hardly daring to breathe far less move, in case she should spoil Marianne's concentration. After about ten minutes when her muscles were protesting with cramp, Marianne blinked, stirred then smiled at Arwen. "He's all right."

"What? Really?" Arwen stared incredulously; her dream had been so vivid that in spite of Tasra's caution, she had been convinced at the back of her mind that it must already have happened.

"Yes, really. He's safe, well - and so's everyone else. He's slightly bored actually - it's too quiet for him."

Arwen grinned with relief. "Typical. Here am I, worrying myself sick and he's bored!"

Marianne shrugged. "It could still happen, Arwen. In this case, forewarned is not forearmed."

"No, that's the most frustrating part about it. I'll have to wait till we hear something's wrong. I'll just have to keep Starfleet HQ badgered for reports - after all, they still haven't got round to removing my ambassadorial status, mainly because we haven't picked one ambassador for the lot of us. Did you - did you speak to Jim?"

"No, I... well, to be honest with you it's not really ethical to contact someone like that - to invade the mind of a non-tel. That's why I brought it up at the meeting - to make sure no one objected. Anyway, I thought it'd be better not to alarm him."

"Hmm, you're right, of course. No point warning him since we can't tell him what to look out for. Dratted dream - almost wish I hadn't had it. It's just going to worry me."

"He means a lot to you, doesn't he?" Marianne said, softly.

Arwen stared at her nonplussed, then a smile broke out, twinkling in her eyes. "You're thinking of what Malcolm said, aren't you? Yes, he does but not in that way - I look on him as a friend, like Bones and Spock." She pushed back her unruly ginger hair. "Even if I didn't, I'm realistic enough not to get involved with someone so career-devoted to Starfleet."

"I think you'd make quite a good career in Starfleet, yourself," Marianne put in. "You've got the right attitude - you get on well with Humans. And you've got bags of self confidence - unlike me."

"Oh, don't you believe it: under this rock steady front is a quivering mass of jelly." They both dissolved into relieved chuckles. Sobering, Arwen admitted, "I am fond of him though - all of them. I wouldn't want anything to happen to them - especially not running into them." She did not have to spell out who she meant; they both knew.

"Me too," Marianne agreed. "The Captain was very fair to me."

"Well, I suppose we'd better get outside and help before we get a reputation as shirkers as well as troublemakers," Arwen said ruefully, lightening the moment. Marianne smiled and together they went out into the bright day of Mardrata-va.

Kirk stifled a yawn then looked up guiltily toward the library computer station, but if Spock had noticed his Captain's boredom - and Kirk was willing to bet that he had, since little escaped his Vulcan friend - he was far too tactful to show it. Immediately, Kirk resolved to concentrate more fully on the mapping procedure and not allow his mind to wander as he had during the past few hours. Then he stood up to stretch his legs and walked slowly over to the First Officer. Spock looked up at his approach.

"Captain?"

"Any... anomalies, Mr. Spock?" As he spoke, Kirk hoped that the answer would be in the affirmative: surely something must break the monotony of the last few days. After all, they were pretty far out from the regular space lanes here. There must be some astronomical phenomenon which called for closer investigation - perhaps even a puzzle that would require a landing party to solve. There were a lot of planets so surely one had to be more than just a barren rock or perfectly ordinary gas giant?

"Negative, sir. Mapping is proceeding according to plan."

"Oh... Very good, Mr. Spock. Carry on." Well, so much for that. A little despondent, Kirk returned to his seat

and forced himself to keep his mind on the uneventful routine. The time seemed to stretch out to infinity and by the end of watch when the turbolift doors opened to discharge the relief crew, Kirk felt he had spent days on duty. Brightening a little, he relinquished the con and joined Spock and the others now leaving the bridge.

As the turbolift started on its way, Kirk listened to the relaxed chatter around him as his command crew discussed their pastimes and activities for the evening ahead, ruefully reflecting on the report writing that awaited him. The lift gradually emptied until finally, he and Spock were its sole occupants. No doubt sensing the Captain's need of a break, the Vulcan suggested that they might play chess, but regretfully Kirk had to decline: he really must get those reports done. But he was pleased when Spock agreed to postpone the game until tomorrow evening: that would definitely be something to look forward to. Bidding the Vulcan good night, he made for his cabin.

After a quiet dinner alone, Kirk conscientiously applied himself to the task of demolishing the vast disorderly pile of tapes and other matters needing his attention. After two hours, he was satisfied that he was making clear inroads and could not deny himself a break any longer. He pushed back his chair, rubbing the back of his neck to relieve the tension there. Bureaucracy, paperwork... sometimes it seemed that that was all there was to being a Captain. At times like these, the thought of getting too old for active service, being put out to grass at a desk job, filled him with horror.

The whistle of his intercom jolted him from his gloomy reverie.

"Kirk here."

"Sir, we've picked up a vessel on the long range scanners."

"I'll be right up. Ask Mr. Spock to come to the bridge, Lieutenant." This was more like it. Relishing the surge of energy and enthusiasm that swept over him, Kirk headed for the door.

"Extreme magnification, Lieutenant Palmer." The small craft blurred then sprang toward them, resolving into crystal clarity. Its once-sparkling white hull was now blackened and badly pitted by what appeared to be the impact craters left by a swarm of meteorites. "Spock?" Kirk turned to the Vulcan who was bowed over his library computer. As he had expected, the other was able to confirm his own, purely visual identification.

"Pandora class private launch, sir."

"This far off the space lanes?" muttered Kirk to himself, then added. "Is there any record of such a vessel being lost, Spock?"

"Negative, sir. Also, you will note that the name and registration have both been obliterated - apparently by meteor damage. Shields are inoperative; it is possible that they failed while the craft was caught up in a shower of heavy particles."

"But?" Kirk asked, sensing the reservation that underlay Spock's tone.

"The eradication of the identifying insignia could also be consistent with the activity of pirates, to hinder investigation should the craft be discovered. However, I am at a loss to explain how it came to be this far from any inhabited Federation world."

"Hmm. What about sensor readings - any lifeforms?"

"Negative. Life support is barely operational, warp drive is burned out and impulse engines retain only half capacity."

Kirk eyed the battered hulk on the screen as if it could give him the answers he craved. "Spock," he began, turning away. "Issue environmental suits - the boarding party will consist of myself, Dr. McCoy and a volunteer from engineering."

"Sir, it would be preferable if I went instead - "

"No, Spock. If this is some kind of trap, I want you and Mr. Scott here." Kirk headed for the turbolift to forestall further argument. His tiredness was now forgotten, dissipated by the flow of adrenalin through his veins. This was what being a Captain was all about.

"Yes, Bones?"

The Doctor's voice spoke tinnily through the speaker by Kirk's ear. "Same here, Jim. Crew - passengers - all dead. Seems they were killed by vapour from a coolant pipe."

"All right, Bones. Keep in touch." Kirk continued his investigation of the control room. The bodies of the crew lay, contorted on the floor, their eyes bulging, faces dark from lack of oxygen. He could find nothing that contradicted the picture of a ship devastated by a meteor storm. But how did it get out here? The ruddy gloom of the emergency lighting cast fantastic shadows in the corners of the room, like watching figures. Despite his earlier excitement, he would be glad to leave this eerie ghost ship.

"Norris here, sir." The engineer's deep voice broke into his thoughts.

"Yes, Lieutenant?"

"Engineering's a mess, sir. The hull was ruptured in three places - explosive decompression. It's... the crew must've died pretty quickly." Kirk heard the horror in Norris's voice held under control by force of will: he sympathised, knowing what things must be like down there.

"Any chance of repairing the sub-light engines?" If the ship could be started on her way on an automatic course back to the nearest space lane, it could eventually be turned over to the experts for a full analysis.

"Yes, sir, but I estimate it'd take a full team at least forty-eight hours."

"All right, Norris. Return to the bridge; we'll beam back to the Enterprise in a few minutes."

"Aye sir."

"Bones, did you get that?"

"On my way, Jim," the Doctor answered. Kirk had told them to keep their suit radio links open at all times in case either of them should run into trouble. He looked down at the small handful of tapes nestling in his gloved palm: with any luck, these would provide the answers they needed. Once it was confirmed that all was safe, a team from engineering could be beamed aboard -

Some sixth sense alerted him. He turned, then froze in shock.

"Greetings, Human. We have long awaited you."

"Wha - who?"

The black clad figure stepped out of the shadows into the murky reddish glow. "We thought we would have to come and look for you but instead, here you are. Most obliging." The woman smiled mockingly. Abruptly, white light flashed into Kirk's eyes, dazzling him. When he lowered his hands from the face plate of his suit, he gazed around himself in disbelief and confusion.

The control room was drastically altered. Brightly lit, its layout had changed and its darkened panels now flashed with coloured lights. The crumpled forms on the floor were picking themselves up, no longer wearing the uniforms of a civilian passenger launch. Now they wore one piece, close fitting garments of all colours and their faces were distorted with smiles of pure malice.

"You may remove your helmet if you wish, Captain. The lack of oxygen was as illusory as everything else."

Kirk did not comply. Instead, he asked, "Who are you? How did you - " He stopped as he suddenly remembered.

"I see that you've recognised us." The woman smiled again but the gesture did not reach the benighted depths of her jet black eyes. "We are the Vendasi - the Great Ones." She raised a hand in command and the figures around her blinked out of existence.

"More illusions?" Kirk asked, trying surreptitiously to edge his hand closer to the phaser clipped on his belt.

"No, Captain - they have gone to invade your ship." She walked over to one of the banks of controls, turning her back on him with self confident insolence. The phaser was in his hand instantly, but before he could fire, it was jerked free of his gloved fingers and flew across to be caught by the woman. "The automatic landing sequence is now programmed."

"Landing? What are you going to do to my ship - my crew?"

"Relax, Captain. They will be well tended. Why not enjoy our hospitality?" As she spoke, Kirk lunged forward but she drew a wand from her belt with lightning speed. A pencil thin beam of orange light stabbed out, enveloping Kirk's whole body in fiery agony. As he collapsed to the floor, she neatly sidestepped. Pushing at the unyielding metal, he tried to lever himself up but the last thing he heard was the woman's jubilant laughter.

Pain... stabbing through his head... pain was his only awareness. He heard a deep groan - realised it was made by himself, and clenched his teeth. Gradually, the agony receded and he was able to open his eyes... and remember.

Careful not to reawake the pounding in his skull, he sat up and looked around at the room in which he found himself. It was light, airy, almost palatial with its spiral pillars and tinkling fountain, the ceiling above it open to the sky. At one end were double doors, seemingly the only way out, apart from the opening in the ceiling. Rubbing the back of his neck, he got up and went over to the doors. As he had expected they were locked.

Sighing, he turned away and went over to the fountain. There was a low wall around it: if he stood on it, he might be able to reach the opening above. He was about to try it when a stirring in his hair made him spin quickly, eyes rapidly scanning the far end of the room. Before his startled gaze, a black-clad figure slowly materialised.

"Welcome, Captain Kirk." She smiled the cruel smile he remembered so well and threw back her long dark hair. Eyes twinkling with amusement, she pirouetted, showing her slim body in its skin tight black and silver garment, to full advantage. "Well? I believe you're fond of good looking women, Captain?" Taunting him, she danced closer. "Tempted?" Her laughter peeled out, high and musical, then her hand reached out and grabbed him by his shirt, with surprising strength. "Well, Captain, once we have finished with you, no woman will want to look at you." She released him abruptly, pushing him back against the wall.

"What have you done with my crew?" he demanded.

"They're all safe - with us. Your ship, too - we've put a crew of our own aboard. But don't worry, we know how to run it - we ransacked a few minds for the details." She sat down on the low wall surrounding the fountain, so that the falling droplets hung between her and Kirk. "Yes, your ship was taken quite easily - we just went aboard and took it. Simple."

"We're on a peaceful mission - " began Kirk.

"Oh, Captain. Surely you're not that naive? You must know why you're here?" Her persuasive tone suddenly hardened to steel. "You killed two of our people, Human. For that you will all die - inventively."

"Your people tried to kill us - "

"You interfered in specimen collection - in one of our surveys. For a long time, we could not be sure - our people could not get full information to us before you killed them - "

"If you can read minds, read mine! Your people's deaths were accidental."

The woman regarded Kirk's anger dispassionately. Suddenly, he felt his mind being roughly invaded. With a cry of pain, he collapsed to his knees, holding his head. After a few moments, the pain lessened. He looked up at the woman's grim face. "You're telling the truth." She sounded almost surprised. "Your tame telepath did it for you. But it doesn't make any difference. We've been searching a long time for prime specimens like you and your crew. I feel sure that you're going to entertain us splendidly."

"What do you mean?"

"Captain, psi-nulls exist to serve us - to do the physical work. Any surplus goes to our entertainment arena. By psi amplification - thanks to advanced technology - we can all participate in the... fun... they provide." She stood and walked to the double doors.

"Wait! We're intelligent beings like yourselves - "

The woman spun on her heel. "No! Not like us. You are psi-nulls, scarcely more than animals. You exist to amuse us - that is all." She waved a hand across a panel in the wall, the doors slid open and she swept out. As Kirk leaped after her, they shut, so that he slammed into them. Driven by frustration, he banged impotently on them, inwardly raging.

A high pitched giggle interrupted him, making him look round in puzzlement. It came again - from overhead. This time, he pinpointed it and slowly returned to the fountain. Sure enough, a young boy of about seven years, was lying on the roof, looking down at Kirk through the square opening. As Kirk smiled encouragingly up at him, the boy smiled back.

"Hi... My name's Jim - what's yours?"

"Lorak," the boy answered, one bare brown arm dangling lazily over the edge. He eyed Kirk with his eyes half-shut, giving him an appearance of slyness. "Do you want to escape?" he asked, casually.

"Yes. Can you help me?"

"I can take you to see your friends. If you climb onto the fountain, I'll give you something to help you escape." His eyes opened more widely; they were as dark as the woman's own. "I can't throw it down - it'd break if you missed it."

"I'm a pretty good catch..." Kirk began but the boy shook his head. "All right." Kirk climbed up onto the rim of the fountain and stretched up.

"That's it." The boy's smile spread into a wide, gap toothed grin. Suddenly, his arm that swung so deceptively casually, moved in a blur. Kirk barely had time to twist away and throw himself clear as he saw the small, wickedly sharp blade flash toward him. He cried out in pain as the knife buried itself in his shoulder. The boy's high, excited laughter rang out in triumph.

"Lorak!" A voice angrily broke in. Teeth clenched in pain, Kirk struggled to rise. A sudden rain of dirt and old leaves fell about him, though most of it seemed aimed at the newcomer. With a scornful laugh, Lorak disappeared.

"Are you all right?" the voice asked in concern, then answered its own question. "No, of course you're not. Here, let me - " Kirk looked up, meaning to angrily rebuff what must be yet another trick, but the words froze on his lips. He found himself gazing into piercingly blue eyes, framed by dark hair. The eyes held him captive.

"Don't be afraid - I won't hurt you." The voice jolted him from his trance and he saw that its owner was a young woman. He recoiled involuntarily as he saw the knife in her hand. "Please - it's all right. I'm just going to cut your shirt."

"All right." He forced himself to relax as she peeled back the cloth to reveal the tiny handle protruding from his flesh.

"You must be... Captain Kirk? I think you've already met my mother." He thought he detected a note of bitterness beneath the bald statement.

"Mother?" he prompted.

"Yes, Ketirah, leader of the council. I am Har, her firstborn. And that," she continued, indicating with a glance the patch of sky above the tinkling fountain, "was my little brother, Lorak." She laid her hand carefully on the bloodstained hilt. "I'm going to pull it out - I'll be as gentle as I can." Kirk nodded and set his teeth.

The knife removed, she quickly placed her other hand over the wound, Kirk's blood streaming between her fingers. He began to speak but she laid a finger to her lips for silence, then closed her eyes, concentrating.

While she was preoccupied, Kirk took the opportunity to study Har more closely. She looked about nineteen, he decided, slim and with a thin serious face. A crease had already marked its path between her brows. The hand she laid across his wound was smooth by contrast, unmarked by manual work. She wore the usual one piece garment, blue to match her eyes and held at the waist by a thin belt, its clasp set with a blue stone.

After a few moments, she opened her eyes and with a shy smile, withdrew her hand. With a start, Kirk suddenly realised that his shoulder no longer hurt. He looked at it: though streaked with blood still, no fresh blood was

flowing from it. As he struggled to accept the fact, the young woman got up and went over to the fountain to wash her hands and wet a cloth which she took from a pouch at her belt. She returned to sponge away the blood from his arm and shoulder revealing the skin beneath - now unbroken.

"How?" he asked, bemused.

"A chance mutation, perhaps? I don't know. No one else has it far as I know."

"I don't understand..."

Har smiled, but there was a bitterness present again. "Psychic healing, Captain. There's not much demand for it here." The bitterness was distinct in her voice also. "I don't know why - I just found I could do it. Mother regards it as another proof of my unfitness to succeed her - which is why I've been passed over in favour of Lorak."

"Har, isn't there something you can do? If you don't agree with her policies -"

"No, no." Har shook her head, obviously distressed. "It's not just her - this is a world of murder and death, Captain. There are too few of us who oppose it. I - I can't tell you anything else - they'd only read your mind." She scrambled to her feet and ran to the door, pausing only for an instant. "I'm sorry, Captain. I can't help you - any of you." Then she waved a hand across the activation panel and fled.

"No, no, no - for the last time - no!" Malcolm's voice echoed stridently around the meeting hall.

"Linalin's shade!" Arwen swore under her breath, but did not get up. Instead, she concentrated on bending the rim of her battered green hat, trying to contain her temper.

"I vote that this gathering has heard enough of these - flights of fantasy - of our esteemed Tithoniél heroine," Malcolm continued cattily, his jowls wobbling with emotion. There was an angry muttering from the Tithoniél benches. Hastily, Malcolm blustered, "Not that I wish to belittle her very real contribution to the establishment and success of our colony. No, not at all. I merely express concern that she has had a little too much on her mind recently - too much concerning this wretched human being!" As usual, his dislike of human beings in general had overcome his wish to appear the reasonable one, his bald head shining red with anger under the sunbeams streaming in from the skylights overhead.

Filled with smouldering anger, Arwen got slowly to her feet. "I have had another precognitive dream, Malcolm, not a 'flight of fancy' as you put it. I merely want your support - and that of the other chiefs - in lodging a formal request to Starfleet, that they keep us posted on the whereabouts of the Enterprise. After all, we are still ambassadors, all four of us - I've tried by myself but they just fob me off. Together, though, we should have enough clout to see that the request is taken seriously."

Malcolm snorted with contemptuous amusement. "No doubt all Mardrata-va is one big joke now, thanks to your constant pestering. I refuse to lend my name to this charade."

"Malcolm, the other chiefs have agreed -" began Arwen, fast losing her temper, but Malcolm cut her off.

"The other chiefs are blood relations of yours - I am not -"

"Shame!" a voice cried. Startled, Malcolm looked up at the highest tiers: some of his own people were up there. Sure enough, he recognised the teenage boy who had stood up, figure stiff with indignation.

"David! Sit down!" he bellowed.

"No I won't!" His son's face was as flushed as his own. "I've heard you sneering at Arwen long enough. Two dreams must mean something. Why won't you help?"

Furious, Malcolm turned on Arwen who stood, hat in hand, gazing up at the young boy with obvious astonishment. "This is your doing! You've been filling his mind with this nonsense. Now you've turned him against his own father." A moment later, he turned round in surprise as David's angry voice came from almost at his shoulder: the boy had teleported from the back benches.

"No, Dad! Arwen hasn't said anything. It's you - you're the one who's talking nonsense." Malcolm could only

stare at him in shock. Arwen stepped forward, her features contrite. She laid a hand on Malcolm's arm. "You're right, Malcolm - I'm sorry. This is setting Mardratan against Mardratan. I withdraw my request."

"Arwen, no!" David cried in dismay. He looked from her to his father, torn by doubt and confusion. There was total silence in the meeting hall, all eyes on the triad at the centre. Malcolm swallowed and looked at Arwen.

"I... I seem to have misjudged you," he began, abashed. "I withdraw what I said, concerning my son."

"Dad..."

"David, ssh. I haven't finished." Malcolm turned back to Arwen, stiffly. "I still don't approve, mind you, of Humans but... since we owe this particular Human a debt of thanks, I... Well, I agree to add my name to the request."

"Dad!" David threw his arms round his surprised father while a cheer went up, the Mardrata rising to their feet. Arwen grinned at Malcolm's obvious embarrassment. "Nothing else mind," he began as David released him. "I won't be a party to involving my clan deeper than this."

"Thank you, Malcolm. I appreciate this," Arwen said, her green eyes twinkling.

"So... that's the request transmitted. All we can do is wait." Arwen flung her hat down onto the bed and sat down heavily beside it.

Marianne smiled. "At least we've done that much. What a stroke of luck - Malcolm agreeing, I mean."

Arwen pushed back her unruly ginger hair. "Yes, it was a calculated risk, I'll admit. He could've gone along with my offer to forget the whole thing."

"Wha - " Marianne abruptly burst out laughing. Arwen assumed a long suffering expression.

"Did I say something funny?"

Marianne shook her head, still laughing. Finally, she managed to speak. "I was just thinking - you're very good at manipulating people when you put your mind to it."

Arwen leaned back against the wall, eyeing her shrewdly. "You make me sound like Piras."

"Oh, never! No, I didn't mean - "

"Relax! I was kidding, that's all. There's something I'd like to ask you though - "

"More manipulation? I suppose you want me to contact Captain Kirk again?"

"If you would. Two dreams in as many weeks - well, it's made me edgy, I don't mind admitting." Arwen rubbed at her neck, trying to relieve the tension there. The last dream she had had still remained vivid in her memory: a bare, dust covered arena burning white beneath a hot sun. Figures had moved there, dwarfed by the vast circular space, figures whose skin was burned dark, whose blood soaked into the dust beneath their feet. Women and men forced to fight with primitive weapons, their bodies controlled like dolls, moving jerkily, forced to cut down their friends. And in a ringside seat, Kirk - held immobile by the iron fist of an evil mind, unable even to look away.

Marianne sat down on the bed as before, nodding. She sank into trance. Impatient, Arwen waited. It seemed hours before the Casreem woman stirred, then turned, wide violet eyes meeting Arwen's own. "Arwen - I can't reach him! There's a barrier, like treacle - pressure. Arwen, I can't reach him!"

Agonised by what he could see in the sunbaked arena below, Kirk strained to move, his mind burning with the urge to seize the woman beside him and wipe the malicious superiority from her face by bartering her life for the lives of his crew. But that was impossible; he was robbed of control over his own body. He could not even move his little finger. Dimly, he heard Ketirah's throaty chuckle.

"Enjoying the spectacle, Captain?" She laughed as she sensed the helpless rage in Kirk's mind. A memory rose

unbidden into his thoughts - of a similar occasion when he had sat beside Merik in a reconstructed 'Roman' arena where his friends had fought for the entertainment of a television audience. But this was a more refined form of cruelty. Here, the spectators did not merely watch but participated, actually experiencing the emotions of those in the arena. Here, the combatants fought not merely against their wish but as manipulated puppets.

The games had begun that first day with the drawing of coloured tokens from a pouch. As far as Kirk understood it, the Vendasi were divided into five factions, each represented by a different colour. Ketirah alone wore black and silver, presumably to denote her position as leader. With the same evil smile on her face as always, she had presided over the draw, as five young members of his crew - held immobile in the grip of Vendasi minds - had each been allocated to a faction. Before the commencement of that day's entertainment however, Ketirah had announced that an inaugural ceremony would be carried out by her personally. Kirk had been dragged across to a wall at the centre of the arena and chained there while Spock, McCoy, Scott and other officers had been fetched and forced to watch. Ketirah had 'marked' him with a glinting silver knife, speaking aloud for the benefit of the Humans present, before filling his mind with obscene images of torture and death - the many ways that his friends might suffer. Afterward, Spock and the others had been led away and he had been taken under mind control to sit beside Ketirah in the place of honour.

As the sun rose still higher, the wounds on Kirk's chest caked over with dried blood and his skin reddened, but held in Ketirah's power he was unable even to shift position and ease his discomfort. He could only watch as four of the five junior crewmembers fought jerkily like dolls, only their faces allowed to mirror their thoughts. The horror and anguish shown on their features belied the murderous fury of their actions as they hacked at each other with rough swords, or swung heavy clubs. Weapons rang heavily against shields as, helpless, each moved to the command of one of the faction members seated in a box directly opposite Kirk's position. As he watched, a young Ensign succeeded in driving her spear past her opponent's shield. The scream that followed was engulfed in the roar of excitement from the crowd. Kirk felt the unrestrained bloodlust of thousands beat at his mind almost like a physical pressure, and realised that Ketirah's control over him was, paradoxically, his only protection; these telepaths did not bother to shield, to protect the sanity of non-telepaths. Sick to his stomach he was forced to watch as the young woman below wrenched out her bloodstained spear and lifted it in a gesture of triumph, her face twisted in an agony of grief. Then the fifth crewmember, belonging to the remaining Vendasi faction, left his position by the central wall and stepped forward to contest the victor.

"A win for Brown," Ketirah said, lazily, speaking aloud for Kirk's benefit. She turned the Human's head to look at her, laughing at what she saw in his eyes and mind. "That was an easy death, Captain. Wait until the serious amusements - these are only minor diversions to test the mettle of our new specimens." She smiled, dark eyes glinting in the sunlight. "You have yet to fully appreciate the beauty of what we do here, Kirk. Only one Vendasi controls each of your crew, yet every member of his or her faction 'listens' to the emotional responses of the animal subject. This preliminary study shows that Humans are quite the most exquisitely responsive subjects we have had for many years." She turned Kirk's head back to face the killing ground once more. "Do not fear, Kirk. Your crew will not be wasted in wanton killing; they will be savoured, used again and again where possible. We don't usually practice our medical skills upon animals but they are considerable and can, no doubt, be adapted. We want you to entertain us for as long as possible."

As Ketirah spoke, anger built up inside Kirk, building and building but unable to find release, until he felt that his head would burst. And he knew that she felt it and was amused. He tried to shut out her voice but could not.

"Yes," she continued. "Your crew are the most sensitive creatures we have found for a long time. And we must not forget you, Captain, the most exquisite of all I'm sure, judging by your emotional responses so far. Yes, I must leave you till last - till you've seen all your friends die. Your despair will be truly breathtaking." She chuckled. "We must find something special for each one; that interesting death I glimpsed in your mind... crucifixion? - that for the physician, I think. And the Vulcan... another fascinating subject - so different from the rest of you, yet so alike. Death by fire, perhaps - after we have broken him." Again, Kirk felt his mind being ransacked for information and tried to block her - to fight back - but he did not know how. "Mmm... interesting. Perhaps that could be induced - hormonal imbalance - pon farr, they call it? Yes, that would make a diverting change."

Kirk sat, trembling with the effort of trying to move, his mind reeling under the impact of a storm of emotions inside him: anger, growing to a strong urge to kill Ketirah, anguish at the fate of his friends and crew, and fear - yes, that was what it was - fear for Spock in particular. A quick death in the arena would be merciful beside their plans for his Vulcan friend. Staring at the mass of faces opposite him, their bodies crouched forward on the stone seats in anticipation, all intent on enjoying the fear and horror of the four remaining victims below them - he suddenly met the gaze of one who was not straining forward. Blue eyes met his with a featherlike touch of compassion against his mind - gone so quickly that he doubted if it had been there at all. But the anger in Ketirah's voice confirmed it had.

"My weakling daughter," she spat. Again, there was a rough and painful searching of his mind that left him feeling bruised and fatigued with the effort to fight it. "I see that you've met. Well, at least she did me one favour in

preserving you. Lorak must be taught a lesson - good material is not to be wasted on childish games."

Although Kirk listened as he must, below the level of surface thought he wondered... why should Har come here if she was so opposed to her mother's regime? To help his people... no, she had said that was impossible. What then? To defy Ketirah? If so, she had certainly succeeded in angering the older woman... If only she could be persuaded -

He tried to quash the thought before Ketirah could read it but she was too swift for him. "Persuade her to go to your ship and signal your Starfleet, Captain? Even if you could succeed, my daughter's power of teleportation is almost negligible. And our own craft are too well guarded. But even if those obstacles didn't stand in the way, she wouldn't risk trading her soft existence here for exile in the wilderness with the other imbeciles. No, don't expect any help from that coward. She knows we only tolerate her presence here because she is who she is." Ketirah's hand caressed the sunburned skin of his bare shoulder. "Accept your fate, Captain and surrender yourself to the exquisite torments we are preparing for you. Be comforted; I will ensure that you have a beautiful death."

"That's it then; it's taken a crisis for them to finally listen to us." Arwen leaned back in her chair, pushing her tangled hair away from her face and feeling more tired and dispirited than she could recall feeling for a long time.

"A starship's on its way," Kledo pointed out. "And they want volunteers."

Arwen nodded. "But Marianne's our strongest telepath, isn't she; if she can't get through that barrier, who can?" She sat forward, burying her face in her hands and trying to think. A hand squeezed her shoulder comfortingly; she looked over her shoulder and saw Marianne standing over her. Half heartedly, she smiled.

"I'll go and so will a lot of the younger Casreem - " Kledo was saying when a thought suddenly struck Arwen.

"Wait!" She turned to face him, a strange expression on her face. "I'm not thinking straight. We don't just need telepath volunteers if the ones who've got the Enterprise are who we think they are."

"What do you suggest?" Tasra, sitting quietly in the corner, spoke for the first time.

"An expedition - a ruse - bait for them to swallow - " As the Mardratan equivalent of adrenalin began to flow, Arwen's words tumbled forth more eagerly. "A party of all the clans in a civilian ship - to convince them we're searching for our long lost home - "

"You mean... we should... play along with them, pretend to be like them..." Marianne said slowly, a note of horror in her voice.

"Yes, we walk straight in through the front door," Arwen confirmed. "Work our way into their confidence, knock out whatever they use for defences - and get the Enterprise's crew out of there."

"That may not be easy - " Kledo began but Marianne interrupted, clearly agitated.

"Arwen, you don't think a handful of us could knock out a planetful of them, do you? You haven't met them!" Even in the dim evening light from the window, her stricken expression was clear enough.

"Let's put some light on the subject," Arwen commented abruptly, getting up to activate one of the solar powered glow lamps. Kledo roused himself to pull down the blinds before sitting down again and Marianne also took a seat but Arwen remained on her feet, her forearms resting on the back of her chair, facing them all. "We don't know how powerful they are, that's just the point!" she began. "No, Marianne - " she continued, sensing her friend about to interrupt. "Think carefully - just what do we know about them - not what they are, but the bare facts. Their power, their ability to combine, work together." She looked expectantly at the young Casreem woman. In turn, Marianne looked doubtfully toward her chief. He nodded encouragingly.

"Well, they... they have all the talents as we did once but... well, each one appears to have a predominant talent. I think so at least; the boy was strongest telekinetically... and well, the woman was the one who controlled Spock... distance control too, so I suppose hers was telepathy."

"Exactly!" Arwen said eagerly. "Just like the Mardrata when we first reached Earth. And what else do we know about ourselves?"

A look of dawning comprehension came on Tasra's face. "We formed factions, according to the strongest talents

among us."

"Which eventually became our clans. We became so inbred that we eliminated the other abilities - which obviously hasn't happened to them. But maybe they still have factions... after all, it's natural to gang together. Maybe they get round the problem by inter-mating across faction lines... which would explain why a brother and sister could have different dominant talents. Maybe they only join their talent's faction when they become adults."

"I still don't see what this has to do with our beating a whole planet of them!" Marianne objected.

"Mari, I admit it's a bunch of theory but... let's face it, we've got pretty good grounds for believing these people are us... how we'd've turned out under different circumstances - "

"No! I won't believe that, I won't!" Marianne sprang to her feet. "Arwen, they're monsters!"

Arwen met her friend's violet eyes, her own filled with empathic understanding. "I know, Mari, but if I'm right we're in the best position in the galaxy for second-guessing them. If we can figure out how they tick, that might give us the edge we need to beat 'em." Marianne nodded reluctantly, sitting down again. "If they are divided into factions, individualistic, it could help a lot. Their powers might be less strong as individuals than ours; we may have lost all but one each, but we've strengthened that one at the expense of the rest. If they are us... Remember, we've only learned to co-operate recently. They're sadistic, mean as hell... and they underestimate anyone else. And as far as we know, even if that woman was strongest on telepathy, she only sent a radio message home. Marianne had her beat hands down - even more so since she's had more practice." She grinned impishly at her friend who shrugged and blushed, but with a bashful smile. "They may rely on technology more - just a guess but I've been trying to figure out this barrier that got Marianne licked. It's possibly some kind of technological jamming - maybe they've got satellites in orbit beaming out some kind of mind jammer. After all, after their operators met up with the Enterprise - they must've got a bit jittery about that. Afraid they'd be found by whoever had helped the Humans?" Marianne nodded, recalling the woman's last message: the 'enemy psi nulls' had help. It made sense that 'they', whoever they were, had taken precautions.

"If you're right, if they boost their power artificially... we could knock it out," Marianne agreed, looking more confident.

"My idea's this. Whoever volunteers, we'll need one Casreem for every non-telepath. And, Marianne, I think you've already given a few demonstrations of mass linking?" As the dark haired woman nodded, Arwen continued. "You can reinforce those before the starship gets here - and in transit, too. The Casreem volunteers will have to shield the rest of us as well as themselves. We'll ask Starfleet for a civilian ship - they'll take us and the ship to where the Enterprise was last reported and then we take off in the civilian crate. We've got one or two shuttle pilots here but even if they don't volunteer, we can always get a crash course on the starship."

"And... if we find these... others, what do we tell them?" Kledd asked.

"Oh, we won't slip too many lies in it. We'll say we're the descendants of a group who came to Earth over eight thousand years ago. We'll say we suffered persecution from the Humans but now they've secretly given us a planet to get us out of the way. But we still want to know where we came from - and... which is the only lie so far... we still want revenge on the Humans."

The others nodded. "What if Starfleet won't wear all this?" asked Marianne. "They like to handle things their way; believe me, I know."

"I'll make 'em wear it. They'll have to see that we're their only hope of getting back the Enterprise and her crew. After all, that's their top starship that's gone missing, not a tug boat."

"All right, that's fair enough," Marianne agreed, sitting forward in her chair, the fingers laced tightly together being her only other visible sign of tension. "If our shield holds up, it might work... but they're bound to ask why we're shielding from them in the first place."

"Natural suspicion on our part?" suggested Tasra. "Eight thousand years of having to live in secrecy should be a convincing explanation. And they'll get enough confirmation of our story from Humans like Captain Kirk - he knows our history in outline, after all."

"Yes." Arwen's confident exterior took a slight dent for an instant as she recalled just what might be happening to Jim and the others even now, to extract that kind of information.

"You can count me in, Arwen."

The quiet but strong affirmation from Tasra brought her back from the edge of the gloom into which she had been about to slide.

Kledo nodded. "Me, too."

The Tithoniél chief looked at her two cousins. "I don't think it's a good idea for three chiefs to go - it's too risky..."

"Arwen, we swore once: our aid to Tithoniél. You've got that now. I only wish Colasarel could offer more practical help. Maybe we should consider taking more volunteers from the more practical clans," Tasra suggested.

"Tasra, I value Colasarel talents; there's no need to devalue them - " Arwen began but the Colasarel chief held up her hands.

"I appreciate that, Arwen. I'm only facing the facts: illusion creation and teleportation will be more useful - in spite of Malcolm, I don't think there'll be any lack of volunteers - out of the non-telepath clans. I think you can manage with one precog and I won't let any of my people take the risk for me."

"Tasra's right," Kledo put in. "And I'm coming because you're going to need more telepaths than any other clan - if you plan to give each non-telepath a Casreem 'twin' for protection." When Arwen nodded, he smiled. "And in case you're worried about leaving the place in Malcolm's hands, we've all got several capable deputies, I believe... and we can vote through enough constitutional safeguards to make sure there's no funny business. Though Malcolm's no Piras, I'm sure."

Arwen grinned, feeling more cheered. "All right, if it's agreed, I'll ask for the volunteers in the morning. And now if you'll excuse me - I really must get my head down."

As the group broke up, the other two clan chiefs heading for their own quarters, Marianne lingered by the door. "I'm coming, too, Arwen."

"Mari... oh, hell. Let's discuss this in the morning, hm?" When her friend reluctantly nodded, she punched her playfully on the arm. "Look, I'm coming back, all right? If only to stop the chieftainship going to cousin Robert; he's a good illusion maker but he's a terrible old bore - he'd send everyone to sleep at the meetings." The two women chuckled tiredly, tension slowly ebbing away. Finally Arwen sighed and straightened up.

"Get some sleep, all right; and don't worry. We'll work it out."

Marianne half smiled, nodding. "I... yes, all right. It's just... I can't help thinking, more and more... if they really are... our beginning, then... what does that make us?"

Kirk staggered through the double doors which closed behind him, and over to the fountain, collapsing gratefully onto the low stone wall. For a few minutes he sat, eyes closed, slumped with dejection. He felt used - violated - as if his body was not his own.

At last, he straightened up, firming his resolve. He had to face this with courage for the sake of his friends and crew. There had to be some way out of this hell before any more people died. As two had died today while he could only watch... watch... Realising that he was torturing himself to no purpose, he pushed those thoughts away and concentrated on splashing water from the fountain onto his chest, washing away the encrusted blood. Touching flesh sore with sunburn, he winced but forced himself to continue. Then a sound from above made him tense, expectantly. About to roll clear, he realised that the figure lowering itself through the opening was female and clad in blue. She hung from the edge for a moment then, before Kirk could help her down, swung clear of the fountain, let go and landed lightly on her feet. She spun to face him, brushing dead leaves from her one piece garment.

Kirk's mouth twitched in a smile, rueful with relief. "Har."

"I - I thought I should see how you were... your wounds..." she began, hesitantly.

"You'd be better seeing to my crew," he retorted, eyes hardening as anger reawoke. Har flushed.

"I have! The injured woman will be all right."

Kirk's eyes widened slightly, then he shook his head with embarrassment. "I'm sorry; I didn't mean that."

The young woman shrugged. "It's all right; I know how you must have felt - forced to watch all that by Ketirah. It's natural you should blame me - I'm her daughter, after all. I'm one of the race torturing and killing your crew."

Kirk got to his feet, taking Har by the shoulders in a gesture of contrition. "No, I don't blame you for what's happened; I was lashing out. Please forget it."

Har smiled shyly, meeting his eyes in a fleeting glance. "You'd better sit down, Captain. I'll check those cuts for you." As Kirk complied, the young woman sat beside him on the fountain's edge. "I can't heal them completely - she'd be angry if I did. But I can ease the soreness... clear any infection..." She laid her hands gently on his chest and began tracing the grid pattern of cuts inflicted by Ketirah, the same serious expression on her face that Kirk had noted when she had healed his shoulder. When she had finished, she dealt with the sunburned skin on Kirk's back and shoulders. At last, she finished and sat back, sighing softly.

"Thank you," Kirk said simply. As Har stood up, he caught at her arm, gently. "There are a few questions I'd like to ask... if you wouldn't mind?"

Har hesitated, biting her lip, then nodded and sat down again. "I can't stay much longer."

Kirk nodded, coming straight to the point. "Ketirah spoke of exiles."

"Yes, they..." Har's hands, resting on her knees, suddenly gripped each other tightly. "In every generation a few are born - like me - who don't like the killing, the torture, of other races. They aren't treated like - like your people - because they've got the same powers as the rest; they can't be classed as 'animals'. But if they won't accept things by the time they reach adulthood, their faction won't accept them and they become outcasts. They just leave... go out of the city."

"Where? Where do they go?" Kirk insisted, seeing a ray of hope.

Har shrugged. "I don't know... no one goes out there." She kept her face averted. Seeing her knuckles white with tension, Kirk persisted.

"Are you afraid to tell me?" he asked, gently.

"Please... I can't -"

"Because they'll read my mind?" As he spoke, Har bounded to her feet, unable to contain her tension any longer.

"Yes, I - I'm only here on sufferance; Ketirah's daughter." Her voice held the same hate as before, but carried fear also. "They'll send me to the wasteland; I can't - I won't -"

"Har!" Kirk interrupted. "You can go to Spock, he can shield his mind - he's a telepath..." Kirk halted, suddenly struck by what he had overlooked during the traumatic time since his capture. "Spock's a telepath... why is he still being treated like the rest of us?"

"Well... they don't tell me much but... as far as I could get from the others, they see him as a... a travesty of themselves. They look on him as... as I suppose you'd regard a retarded infant."

"We don't torture and kill our retarded infants," Kirk said, harshly, his concern for the Vulcan inflaming him to anger once more. This time, Har's temper also flared.

"I'm sorry, Captain, I'm only telling you what I know. Look, I'm taking a risk just being here: Mother excused my last visit because I patched you up but I doubt if she'll be very pleased when she finds out about this - and she will. The only reason my faction accepted me was because I'm her daughter, but they'll unaccept me any time she gives the word." Flushed with anger, she glared at him, fists clenched.

"I'm... sorry, Har. I seem to be making a habit of this," Kirk apologised. He smiled to stress his plea. "Forgive me?"

Slowly, Har subsided. "It... it's all right. Was... was there anything else you wanted to know, Captain?"

"Please - call me Jim." As Har smiled and nodded, Kirk continued. "You say these... outcasts... exist in the wilderness - " He saw her tense up again and shook his head. "All I want to know is, are there other places - cities - that they might have gone to instead?"

Har stared in amazement. "Other cities? This is the only one, Cap - Jim." She smiled as Kirk in turn showed surprise. "Outside the city are large areas of cultivation, worked by the slaves, descendants of those captured on past raids and kept for breeding. Beyond the cultivation, everything is classed as wilderness. I don't know much about it but I do know that the city was built in the midst of the best farming land. A lot of our planet is just... mountains and deserts... barren land where it's hard to grow anything. That's where the exiles have to live."

Kirk nodded, understanding Har's fear of expulsion from the city. "What about the slaves? Is there any chance they could rise up... rebel against Ketirah's rule?"

"The slaves?" Har laughed in disbelief. "They're placid, docile. There's no spirit in them. That's why the Vendasi still raid - to get spirited subjects for their games. They're bored, Jim, bored and cruel. Don't think it's just Ketirah. Our only hope is that this will be a peaceful world one day... when the Vendasi die out. A peaceful world populated only by the exiles and the freed slaves, living in harmony."

"What makes you think that could happen?"

"There are fewer children born each year... I don't know why. A genetic defect, maybe. Apart from the exiles, our whole race is crammed into this one city. A few hundred years... we can't last much longer than that."

Maybe, but that wasn't much help to his people, Kirk reflected silently. He was about to question her further when a look of fear crossed Har's face. "What is it?" he asked, but she was already scrambling onto the lip of the fountain. Kirk turned, in time to see the double doors sliding open and sprang to his feet to help her. With a panic stricken glance at him, Har leaped off the fountain wall and seized the ornate buckle of her belt, shutting her eyes and frowning with intense concentration. As Ketirah entered the room, her daughter vanished.

The older woman halted, a flash of annoyance on her face. "If that creature tries my patience any further she can scratch for berries in the wilderness." She turned her gaze on Kirk, who braced himself, recognising the meaning in that look... but it was no good. Being prepared did not make him better able to fight her ruthless interrogation. After some moments, he slumped to his knees, clutching at his head. Dimly, he heard the woman's furious hiss.

"So... Har may have been a little too clever. I shall have to deal with her... soon. But there's no hurry."

Kirk's head was abruptly forced up by a rough grasp under his chin. Blinking through the pain, he met Ketirah's harsh gaze. "I came to ask you how you enjoyed the entertainment."

"You - " Desperately, Kirk lunged at her, hands reaching for her throat. She went down beneath him, a look of astonishment and alarm on her face. But an instant later, an iron fist clamped down on his mind, sending red hot agony along every nerve. He fought for breath as his body convulsed, hatred for Ketirah forgotten. Then the burning pain ceased leaving only a nagging ache in every part of his body.

"Get up." A toe nudged him in the ribs. Trembling with reaction, he got slowly to his feet, facing the alien woman with defiance in his eyes and mind. "Not very clever, Kirk. You will pay for it when the time is right." With a last, hard glare, she turned and left the room. Suppressing a sigh, Kirk walked unsteadily over to the fountain and sat down on its rim to rest and think.

"If only we knew what they were doing to Jim," McCoy fretted, pacing the tiny cell. He reached the end and, turning again, eyed the Vulcan with exasperation. Spock, seated on a stone ledge, returned his gaze mildly.

"Doctor, I believe you have already said that - four times in all - "

"Damn it, Spock! Don't you care what might be happening to him right now?"

Spock studied his clasped hands that rested on his knees. "I share your concern for the Captain's well being, Doctor. However, pacing the cell achieves nothing except purposeless expenditure of energy."

McCoy's mouth firmed with anger. He opened it, about to vent more of his frustration on the Vulcan. But he suddenly deflated. "Oh, what's the use?" He flopped down dejectedly into a corner. At least the cell was dry even if

rather stuffy. He eyed the streams of sunlight entering high up on the left hand wall, and was filled with longing to be on the other side of that barred window. But Spock had tried its strength when they had first entered the cell. Worn out by frustration and anxiety, he leaned his head back against the wall and closed his eyes.

About to offer the Doctor his rocky ledge, Spock froze, aware of footsteps approaching along the corridor outside... stopping on the other side of the locked door. He waited patiently but there was no rattle of key in the old fashioned lock. Instead, a slim, blue clad figure materialised in the beam of light from the window. In an instant, the figure was at McCoy's side. Spock was on his feet and had grabbed the intruder in a moment, but a glance at the Doctor showed him that he was too late: the startled expression on the Human's face was belied by the vacancy in his blue eyes.

"Let me go..." the voice was young, female. "Let me go," she repeated fearfully.

"What have you done to McCoy?" Spock asked coldly.

"He's all right. Let me go and I'll explain - Captain Kirk sent me."

At Kirk's name, Spock released her and stood back. She turned, rubbing her right arm and gazing apprehensively at him with eyes as blue as McCoy's. "He's all right: I put him in a mild trance. He mustn't hear any of this."

Spock did not comment; instead, he questioned her previous statement. "You have spoken with the Captain?"

"Yes, he's well... he's being held in Ketirah's palace."

"The Captain was injured during the 'ceremony'." Spock's voice held a hint of distaste at the memory and also doubt at the stranger's reassurance.

"I'm a healer," she explained. "I did what I could; those cuts have been used to mark captives for centuries so Ketirah would be very angry if I removed them, but I've made sure they'll heal cleanly. Listen, you're a touch telepath - there are things I know that might help but I can't risk telling anyone else. Your Captain said I should tell you. Can you shield your mind - strongly?" Spock nodded. "All right. We must be quick. It'll be safer if I tell you mind to mind."

By unspoken consent, they sat down on the stone ledge, Spock's fingers reaching for the young woman's temple. She caught his hand and he sensed her reluctance to go through with this.

"I... I prefer to initiate the link."

As McCoy continued to sit with his look of blank eyed surprise, the two figures opposite him became equally still. After a few minutes, they stirred again. The woman eyed Spock with a new respect.

"Your shield's as strong as any Vendasi shield." She stood up, nervously fingering the ornate buckle at her belt with its cloudy blue stone. "And you don't rely on a booster."

Spock reflected on what she had told him in the meld; her contact with the exiles, the reliance her people placed on the labour of their slaves and on technology. The most important of their technological supports were the powerful orbital deflectors placing a distorted sensory belt all around the planet, only penetrable by those with the knowledge, and the miniaturised power boosters most Vendasi wore in their belts... and kept a secret from their slaves. Even from those trained to build and maintain the space going vessels used for raiding.

"May I have that?" Spock asked. Har shook her head.

"No, I - it would be missed. I'll get you one from the workshops... I'll do it somehow." She stepped over to the immobile figure of McCoy, then looked back at Spock, uncertainly. "He saw me... I have to make him forget." When the Vulcan did not object, she faced McCoy again and closed her eyes, concentrating. A moment later, she straightened up and, concentrating again, vanished. Spock's keen ears detected her light steps running away down the passage outside.

McCoy blinked and stirred, looking around in confusion till he focused on Spock. "What... I must have dozed off for a moment."

Spock stood up, vacating the stony ledge. "We are both tired, Doctor. I suggest sleep." He seated himself beneath the window and, sensing the Human's reluctance to take the ledge, added, "I shall meditate, Doctor. I am quite comfortable here."

McCoy nodded. "Well, if you're sure... thanks, Spock." He settled himself as comfortably as he could on the rough bed, and soon the steady rise and fall of his breathing told Spock that the Doctor was asleep. Satisfied, the Vulcan sank into reflection on his newfound knowledge.

Arwen glanced across at the dark haired figure by the observation window, sensing the yearning in her friend's gaze. With obvious reluctance, Marianne tore herself away from the stars and returned to the group of patiently waiting Casreem. "I'm sorry to keep - " she began then stopped. She exchanged a nervous glance with Arwen and then drew herself up taller. "If you're ready, we will now initiate a group meld."

The circle of figures grew still, some with eyes closed, others staring glassily at nothing. Arwen stepped away, satisfied that the practice session was proceeding well, and joined the rest of the Mardrata. Their anxieties about the approaching ordeal - and their own possible connection with those who had seized the Enterprise - had reawakened all their old fears of Humans and driven them to spend most of their time in the observation gallery - even those who did not have to practice mass mind links. Arwen suspected that the Yorktown's skipper, who had had to be let in on some of the secret, was relieved that his unusual passengers were keeping out of his way.

Chatting to the other Mardrata, Arwen was aware of the tension underlying all the bright smiles and slightly-too-loud voices. After Arwen's last communication with Starfleet HQ, it had been agreed that a short stop could be made at Starbase 14 to take aboard a small civilian passenger vessel which had been hastily procured and awaited them there. Now that the vessel had been taken aboard, their next stop would be the last known position of the Enterprise - currently only a couple of days away. They would board the small sleek ship and seek out the Others... at least, all but one of them would board that vessel.

Arwen glanced over at Marianne, still deep in checking and strengthening the mass meld. She was glad that her friend's confidence had been improving more and more in the past ten days since leaving Mardrata-va. Marianne's self esteem had taken some heavy knocks as Arwen was well aware; her accidental killing of the telekinetic boy when saving Phil Surrey's life and then the conflict of loyalties she had experienced between Starfleet and fellow telepaths. On Mardrata-va, she had begun to recover, and now the knowledge that she was doing something that no one else could, was working wonders. Arwen looked round at the non telepaths in her own group. Familiar faces all: even some that she had herself invited to Mardrata-va - Levi, who could not be persuaded to leave this job to the younger ones, Suzanna who had left her son in her husband's care, insisting that the party must not lack the skills of a telekinetic to counter their enemies' demonstrated expertise in that field. Her skill and Levi's strong illusion creating ability could not be refused. And Tasra had been right; there were Nadeshiel here - though Malcolm had succeeded in keeping one keen young volunteer at home... his fourteen year old son.

Marianne blinked, looked round at the still linked Casreem and then detached herself from their group to join Arwen and the others. "Please everyone, can I have your attention?" she asked, speaking confidently. As the chatter died down, she smiled and continued, "We're going to practice the one-to-one shielding again. Please join your Casreem partner."

Obediently, each non telepathic Mardratan sought out his or her opposite number, who had now emerged from the collective mind link. Arwen had teamed with Kledo.

"Casreem, begin when ready."

Arwen smiled at the authoritative note in her friend's voice, then relaxed as she had been taught. She felt Kledo's mind touch hers, then move in to enclose her completely within his own mental shield. Comfortable? The thought echoed with a trace of amusement beneath it.

Perfectly, she answered. Are you going to try the link-up next?

Yes, Marianne's decided you're all ready for it now.

Arwen heard Marianne speak. "The final stage - which we're calling link-up - is something we haven't yet tried, but if we can make it work you'll find it very useful. The theory is that each telepath should link with others, still protecting his or her non-telepath partner. We can thus form a group meld within our whole group, not just the Casreem part of it, and the non-telepaths will be aware of what's happening when Casreem pass messages, even if our whole party's not together."

Arwen lifted an eyebrow at Marianne's lapse. She still wants to come too, doesn't she, she thought, knowing Kledo would pick up any thought she 'vocalised'.

Now... we'll have to speak to her again. He stopped as Marianne asked him to initiate the meld.

Arwen found the process fascinating. Cushioned as she was by Kledo, she did not experience the complete honesty and soul baring quality of a group meld between telepaths; Marianne had realised that non-telepaths would not be able to adapt to that in only a couple of weeks. But Arwen was still aware of the 'voices' of the others as they 'called in' to confirm that they had joined the meld, and she felt the jubilation among the Casreem as they realised the meld had worked.

All right, Marianne broke in. Well done, everyone. We'll take a break and try this again this evening, OK? Fine.

The meld broke into its pairings, each telepath then gently dissolving the bond with her or his partner. As the Mardrata headed for the turbolift, Arwen asked Marianne to wait.

"All right." Outwardly calm though Marianne appeared, Arwen thought she detected a sudden wariness in her friend.

"Marianne," Kledo began, when the others had gone. "You still want to come with us." It was a statement, not a question.

Marianne flushed and nodded. "You've seen it in the meld," she said, shrugging slightly. "I think you're going to need me."

"Marianne, you've already helped us enormously. Without your skills - " Kledo began, but an outburst from his clan subordinate cut him off.

"What I've taught you is only the beginning! I'm the only one who's met these - people, who knows what they're like. And I've also mind linked with both Captain Kirk and Doctor McCoy - none of the other Casreem have even met them. How would they find their minds if that was necessary?"

"They could get the information from Arwen: that should be sufficient," Kledo calmly pointed out, unruffled by the disrespect which, technically, Marianne had shown.

"I still should come - I - "

"Mari, you'd be as good as dead as soon as you walked through their door," Arwen put in. "They must've got the whole story of what happened to their people from Jim or the others. It won't matter to them that you didn't mean to kill anyone. As far as they're concerned, human beings are lower than animals - to them, what you did would be like shooting someone to stop them stepping on an ant." She studied her friend's face for some sign of acceptance. Marianne's defiance smouldered in her violet eyes. Deciding it was time to get tough, Arwen glanced at Kledo and read the acquiescence in his eyes. "Marianne," she continued. "It's going to be hard enough for us to win their acceptance. Look at it this way; if you come along, they'll probably shoot the lot of us before we get a chance to open our mouths."

"Not if I'm your prisoner: a token of your good faith. I can act the humble penitent - after all, they did try to kill me. That must be some excuse - especially if they're as 'I'm all right, Jack' as you think. Look, we're - we're primitives compared to them, right, looking for enlightenment. I'll grovel like anything - I don't think they'll kill me - not if they're as bored as I think they are. That's what it's all about, after all; they need entertainment." She stopped, looking anxiously at them both. "Remember - I've met them face to face. They underestimate people, they're vain, they think no one's as good as them. If I butter 'em up, I honestly don't think they'll kill me."

Arwen looked uncertainly at Kledo. "She's got a point... what do you think?"

Kledo stared at her in amazement, then at Marianne. "I think you're both crazy - "

"But it might just work, Kledo. We're going to have to act really nasty to Jim and the others; well, Marianne has more reason for nursing a grudge against Humans than any of us... if she can project that strongly enough..."

"Kledo," Marianne spoke seriously. "I'm one of your strongest - if I say so myself. Wouldn't you rather have me along to reinforce the group shield?"

Kledo smiled a little sheepishly. "Ordinarily, yes. Oh, damn, I can't stand the two of you ganging up on me. I'll have to think this over. Come on, let's get some lunch."

Kirk swallowed, feeling the sweat suddenly cold on his skin. He felt sick - a lot sicker than he had felt the first time he had sat here. Ketirah had not been joking when she had called those first murderous conflicts mere tryouts. Over the days that had followed, the 'amusements' had graduated into more refined and obscene forms of cruelty. Today's entertainment, for instance, had seen the systematic torture of members of his crew by their own colleagues. The tortures had stopped short of irreparable injury or death though; as Ketirah had said, his people were being 'savoured'. In fact, some were now to be reserved for breeding purposes and he had been informed that a visit of inspection to the 'breeding pens' was on his agenda for tomorrow. Apparently, eighty of the youngest, fittest crewmembers would be retained to ensure a permanent supply of good material for the games. Kirk had tried to argue that all his crew should be spared, hoping to buy time but Ketirah had retorted that this was just an interim measure in case there was difficulty in obtaining such excellent specimens elsewhere. Past raids had usually only procured slightly less passive victims than the slaves who already served the Vendasi. The few planets, possessing aggressive inhabitants had been unable to meet the voracious appetite of the Vendasi for very long. This time, Ketirah had vowed, such valuable specimens would not be squandered.

With nothing else to do but think during the long hours of his confinement in Ketirah's palace, Kirk had pieced some of the facts together. The Vendasi had presumably cleared all the planets in their own and neighbouring star systems and thus been forced to range further, finally coming into Federation territory and encountering the Enterprise. Despite their psychic abilities and technology, in view of their restricted numbers they would presumably confine their raiding to sparsely populated or low technology worlds, and to piracy of Federation vessels. Even so, that was a large enough danger; apart from his duty to save his crew and his ship, he had an even more pressing one to warn the Federation. But he had to suppress that thought as well as he could; he had already unwittingly betrayed Har.

As Kirk sat, eyes on the bloody sand below, the flogged victims were removed from the frames on which they had been secured and dragged away by grey clad slaves whose faces were expressionless. The women and men who had been forced to ply the whips were now released from control; some collapsed, sobbing, to the sandy floor, others yelled curses at the enthralled crowds above, the hate and horror in their voices all too clear.

"Exquisite," Ketirah's voice breathed by Kirk's ear, ecstatic. "A truly rich emotional response."

Around him, Kirk could sense the silent crowd drinking in the mental pain of the figures below, just as they had absorbed the physical agony of those whose backs had been lacerated. One of the women, her hair dishevelled, her red uniform smeared with sand, ran toward Kirk's side of the arena, halting at the wall directly below. She looked up, tears streaming down her face.

"Captain, I - " Uhura's voice broke.

Kirk's heart lurched with recognition but the only outward sign of reaction he could make was a muscle tightening in his jaw. Some of the blank faced slaves grabbed the communications officer, dragging her from the arena.

"We must keep that one for breeding, I think."

At the Vendasi woman's words, Kirk felt such an upsurge of rage that for a moment it was as if his vision had filled with blood. He forced himself to try to control it, knowing his frustration only amused his captor. Below, slaves shovelled clean sand over the blood darkened patches, while others marched away the remaining members of his crew.

Har hurried away from the cell, her heart beating rapidly. Mentally, she cursed herself for a fool in coming here; she had been avoiding her mother since her last visit to Captain Kirk, yet here she was again sneaking in and out of cells under the arena. She only hoped the Vulcan had everything he needed this time; at least, he had not requested any more tools, so she supposed he must be satisfied.

Emerging into the open, beneath the walls of the arena, she breathed deeply, schooling herself to walk as casually as possible toward the slave quarter. She had found a temporary refuge there thanks to the awe in which the slaves held her people, though she had felt a few twinges of guilt at having to intimidate them a little. Still, despite her beliefs, she had always had difficulty in accepting the slaves as her equals with their bland-faced servility and the hushed, fearful tones of their voices whenever they were permitted to speak. Their complete lack of spirit had one advantage however; it meant that the Vendasi rarely bothered to read their minds. If not for that, she would have been unable to remain in hiding among them during the past few days.

In the confines of one of the narrow alleys where the slaves had their dwellings and workshops, she quickened her pace, anxious to reach the house where she had been sheltering. A slave woman approaching flattened herself against the wall and waited with downcast gaze until Har passed. The Vendasi woman clicked her tongue in annoyance but did not stop; there was nothing she could do to change the slaves as she had discovered during her secret visits here as a child. No matter how many times she tried to persuade the slaves to leave the city and go into the wasteland, they were too afraid of the Vendasi. "But without you, they'll starve; you do everything for them!" she had protested. It was no good; the slaves were convinced that the Vendasi would only pursue them and bring them back to face terrible tortures. They and their fellow workers in the agricultural lands were all alike, as she had discovered in conversations with exiles when she had grown older; there was not one spark of rebellion left in them.

Reaching the house where she had been hiding, Har checked the alley in both directions, double checking that no one was nearby as far as she could with her limited telepathic skills. Satisfied that she was unobserved, she concentrated, holding the booster on her belt. Moments later, she was in the upstairs room which had been prepared for her. A small table was ready laid with bread, cheese and fruit; simple fare that the slaves themselves ate. Too hungry to be disdainful, Har began to eat, reflecting as she did so on the help she had given the Vulcan. The hardest part had been obtaining the booster from the high tech workshops; the normally lax security was tighter there due to the Vendasi wish to preserve their image of total superiority and invulnerability in the eyes of their slaves. The tools and spare parts had been easier although she still was not sure what the Vulcan was trying to construct: a superior booster for himself, perhaps? Although when she had caught a glimpse of the device it certainly had not resembled a booster. Whatever it was, he had accomplished a lot in spite of having to work at night while his cell mate slept, the material being concealed during the day behind a brick he had loosened beneath the stone ledge. She only hoped that whatever scheme he had in mind would be put into operation soon; how much longer could she hold out here before Ketirah ran her to earth? Exile... she could not imagine it. Forced to toil over grudging plots of cleared land or else sneak into the agricultural areas at night to steal. Having to do all the heavy work oneself without slaves to whom it could be delegated. She had learned the bare outline from the exiles with whom she had spoken in secret but they had always preferred to discuss the surely inevitable downfall of the city folk rather than their own miserable existence. Har sipped at a mug of burac, a pleasant tasting, energy rich drink popular among the slaves. When she had last met her contact, Dwiid, just before it had been announced that Ketirah wished to see her, she had been momentarily tempted to go with him then, and avoid the humiliation of formal exile. But her courage had failed her; even the comparative poverty of a slave's home was better than the wilderness.

Around her, the little room was darkening as the sun sank below the roofs opposite. Har reached for the small oil lamp on the mantelpiece above the rough stone fireplace but changed her mind. She was tired: an early night would refresh her. Leaving the remains of supper on the table to be cleared up by her hosts, she closed the wooden shutters and undressed before sinking gratefully between the coarse but cool sheets.

"Ketirah... Ketirah..."

The Vendasi leader groaned and turned over, hoping to shut out the insistent voice. But it repeated its demand for attention and a hand gingerly shook her shoulder. Unable to ignore the intruder any longer, she sat up, ready to vent her fury on the impudent slave. But instead she saw Stozac, one of her own people, standing beside her bed, his expression one of concern mixed with apprehension.

"Well?"

"There's a reading on the scanners - a small vessel approaching."

"Not one of our raiders?"

"No, different configuration. We've been tracking it for some time - we didn't want to wake you but it has now entered the region of orbit."

Ketirah nodded, eyes hooded. Stozac watched her nervously in the subdued illumination of the overhead glow light. "So... Unwary strangers or more Federation...?" Abruptly, she swung her legs out of bed: despite the casual attitude to nudity held by the Vendasi, Stozac swallowed and directed his attention on the glow light as his superior slipped into her usual black and silver garb. Then he fell in behind her as she swept from the room.

In the control centre, just beyond Ketirah's private wing of the palace, all attention was focused on the tracking monitor and the tiny image just completing its final manoeuvre into planetary orbit. As Ketirah entered with the officer of the watch behind her, those present sprang to attention.

"Report!" she snapped.

"The vessel has taken up orbit - "

"Orbit! How? It shouldn't even be able to detect us! Have you made contact yet?"

"No, Ketirah - "

"Then give me a channel." As she delivered the command, the Vendasi leader gauged the distance separating the Enterprise from the intruding vessel. Although the small ship lay just beyond the orbit of the mighty Federation cruiser, the bulk of the planet served as a shield. Only if she ordered the current skeleton crew aboard the Enterprise to take her out of orbit, would they be able to manoeuvre into a firing position. Besides, there were unanswered questions and a boarding party would avoid the waste of possibly valuable specimens. Mind made up, she moved over to the communications console. "Intruder ship, respond or be destroyed."

A young woman's voice immediately answered. "Are you the Vendasi? We've come to join you."

Startled, Ketirah looked round at the others and realised that their expressions of consternation must mirror her own.

"Vendasi, did you hear us? We've come to join you. We've come a long long way just to find you. Because we're like you. We... we've come home." The voice halted, husky with emotion. Ketirah stared at the tiny shape on the monitor, trying to comprehend what she had just heard. The voice continued, "We request permission to land."

In control once more, Ketirah found her voice. "Denied. We will board first and see what you really are." She cut the link and turned to Stozac. "I want a team of our strongest reds - see to it."

Arwen turned away from the wall comm, grimacing as if she had a nasty taste in her mouth. "I think we'd better get ready." As she spoke, Carolyn, the pilot, entered.

"I've left the controls on automatic."

"Good. Right, now we're all here, we'd better group ourselves around Marianne. I don't want them seeing her until we've got through the preliminaries." Arwen spoke aloud from habit even though it was unnecessary since all her 'public' thoughts were being relayed by Kledo to the others.

Quickly, they took up position, bunched defensively in the corner. The nervousness of the others was an almost tangible presence in Arwen's mind: a nervousness she shared. Would their shield be strong enough - not to mention their story? Marianne, pale but composed, knelt at their centre, hands bound behind her. Standing at the forefront of the group, fidgeting with the brim of her battered green hat, Arwen could imagine how her friend was feeling now... but it could only be imagination. Marianne alone was excluded from the composite meld. If only the stubborn Casreem had not defied Kledo's final ruling by stowing aboard! When she had failed to make an appearance on the hangar deck to see them off, Arwen had supposed that Marianne was finding her enforced staying behind too painful to bear the actual parting. Only when they had neared the orbiting Enterprise had Marianne been discovered - too late to return her to the Yorktown which was patrolling out beyond the Vendasi star system. There was no choice now but to bluff it out via Marianne's own suggested ploy... which now seemed frighteningly fragile. Like the others, Arwen's gaze was directed toward the other side of the room: the dining/recreation area which they had selected as the site of their first confrontation with the enemy - an easy choice since it was the only room large enough on the entire ship to hold their group. As Arwen wished the Vendasi would hurry up and get it over with - they suddenly did. There was no gradual sparkling outline to denote a transporter beam, just a faint pressure of displaced air that wafted toward the Mardrata.

For a moment, the two groups merely looked at each other. Arwen noted their one-piece garments, all red except for that of a tall, dark haired woman standing in front - a woman dressed in black and silver. Arwen stared, aware of a gasp of horror from her cousin Ros just behind her. Clenching her teeth together, Arwen somehow succeeded in suppressing a shudder. That face... she knew it so well. It was the face of the woman in her precognitive dreams. The woman who had tortured Jim. She felt the wave of heightened tension that rolled through the link at the sight of those wary but casually malevolent faces and then the pursuing calmness imposed by the Casreem components. It was finally here: the realisation that they were at last in the presence of those Others... those from whom they might have sprung. Arwen forced herself to step forward just as the dark haired woman did likewise.

"Who is your leader?" That voice... just as she remembered it. She could almost sense waves of arrogance

radiating from this woman. Projecting strength and confidence, she replied, "I am." Instantly there was a fierce probing at the walls of her mind... or rather, the joint group mind. The Casreem rose to meet it - rose - held. Miracle! The shield held. The first test had been passed.

"Why resist my probe?" the woman snapped, suspiciously.

"Because I'm not a telepath," Arwen answered, more casually than she felt. "Some of us are, some of us aren't," she continued, sensing the instant contempt of the Others.

"You claim to be like us - " the woman sneered.

"We've been away a long time," Arwen interrupted, projecting the arrogance she knew they would expect. "Over eight thousand years by the time scale of the planet where we've been exiled. Our ancestors eventually forgot where we had come from, why we had left. Only now are we able to return. Don't condemn us before you've heard our story."

The woman eyed Arwen, a grudging respect in her gaze. "Very well..." She waved a hand without turning round and the rest of her people filed from the room.

"There are no weapons or booby traps," Arwen put in.

"I like to be sure."

Arwen nodded, trying to convey by her expression that she approved of such caution.

"I am Ketirah, leader of the Vendasi," the woman volunteered. Arwen was aware of cautious confidence from the link: evidently the first barrier to acceptance had been overcome.

"Arwen, ch - leader of Tithoniél - "

"Tithoniél? Ah... tith, dream. Your language has altered - "

"Surely to be expected?" Arwen returned. "This," she indicated the young man beside her, "is Kledo, leader of our telepath contingent, and Tasra is leader of the precognitives. Suzanna represents the telekinetics."

Ketirah's eyes narrowed. "How could your powers have been split in this way?"

"Factions developed, quarrels. Our groups became isolated, perhaps inbred."

"I see. Thankfully that is not the case here. We encourage inter-faction mating," the Vendasi leader said sagely.

Mentally, Arwen heard Kledo's congratulations on her reasoning; it looked as if her picture of Vendasi society was not far off the mark. "No doubt you did not have a large hostile population of ungifted primitives indigenous to your planet, creatures from whom you had to conceal your difference," she said firmly. "I think you've had dealings with them recently - they call themselves Humans."

"Humans!" Ketirah spat the word. "Yes. You've seen their vessel in orbit? We captured and brought it here."

"Our sensors only picked up a large craft of some sort; they're not good enough to identify it - "

"And yet you found our planet!"

Arwen shrugged with a nonchalance she did not feel. "One of us had precognitive dreams which led us to believe that the Enterprise had fallen into the hands of people like ourselves. When we heard of its disappearance, we managed to secure the location and came to seek you. As for penetrating your camouflage... well, whatever you're using seems to work on the same wavelength as our Tithoniél illusion generating ability: we managed to 'see' through it, that's all."

Ketirah's dark eyes held a new respect. "Divided as they are, your powers must still be considerable."

"But sometimes barely controllable. We hope you will help us learn control. For centuries we have yearned to be united with those from whom we sprang. Centuries of persecution at the hands of the Humans." Arwen tried to infuse hatred into her voice. "Although they've now given us a planet to be rid of us, we would love to make them pay."

"Some of them are paying: the Enterprise crew. They were responsible for the deaths of two of our people - or

rather, a tame telepath they had aboard..."

This was it! Arwen saw the dawning realisation on Ketirah's face. "I know," she broke in quickly. "She killed without meaning to - unable to control the strength of her power. Later, she was in a landing party on another planet where non-telepaths warred against telepaths. She was forced to choose - and chose her own kind. Now she repents her deed: she has accompanied us - willingly - to ask your forgiveness." As she spoke, Arwen was aware of the surprise and alarm of Kledo and through him, the other Casreem. This was not exactly the story they had all agreed upon...

"She is here?" Ketirah's eyes narrowed, glinting angrily in the overhead lighting. Arwen stepped aside and, reluctantly, the rest of the group drew back to reveal Marianne. The young Casreem, her violet eyes vivid in her paler-than-usual face, met Ketirah's furious gaze with courage. "So, this is the one with such power. Why is she tied if she is here freely?"

"She places herself at your mercy," Arwen smoothly put in, praying that such a thing existed. "She is willing to face the punishment." Behind the battered green hat she clutched in her right hand, the Tithoniél chief crossed the fingers of her other hand.

"I see." Ketirah stepped forward and grabbed the Casreem by the chin, forcing her head back. Arwen drew in a breath raggedly, sensing the others waiting to act - to go down fighting in an inglorious defeat. Marianne continued to stare back at the other woman's cold, dark eyes. Heart hammering, Arwen felt a surge of pride at her friend's effort of will.

"She has courage," Ketirah said. "I like that. So, you killed from zeal, is that it?" She released Marianne and stepped back.

"Ever since I was a child, I longed to go into space - to explore and see the universe. The only way I could was through Starfleet, the Humans' organisation... I tried to fit in with them, I really did. One... one man was kind... I - when I saw one of your people try to kill him, I just got so angry - I tried to stop him, that's all. I never meant to kill him." Reliving the experience, Marianne bowed her head.

"We must teach you control - all of you." Ketirah sounded almost amused. Marianne looked up, incredulous hope shining through her tears. "I will tell my people to extend our best hospitality," Ketirah continued, smiling. "Get to your feet. You will make a good Vendasi... If only my daughter had your will and courage."

As the Vendasi leader turned away, Arwen quickly untied her friend's hands, aware as she did so that the link had surged forward, mingled and reformed to enfold Marianne safely within its bounds..

I can't believe it. Marianne's 'voice', relayed through Kledo, 'sounded' in Arwen's mind. I thought they'd kill me!

So did I - I think I'm going to pass out with relief! If they had it would have been my fault.

No, I stowed away in the first place - the responsibility's mine. Anyway - thanks; I think your story was better.

Call it inspired guess work. That woman only respects strength: if we want to be accepted as equals, we can't afford to show less arrogance than them.

Man... weakness equals inferiority, you mean? Yes, I think you're right; that's how we have to play it.

"I have instructed that your ship be made welcome," Ketirah announced. Instantly, Carolyn made for the door but the Vendasi woman raised a hand. "Relax - my people are at the controls. Enjoy your homecoming."

Forced smiles on their faces, the Mardrata nodded.

Kirk forced down the inner tension gripping his stomach as he was marched into a chamber similar to his own but more spacious and far more ornate in decoration. A group of colourfully dressed people was standing around the foot of a dais upon which Ketirah was seated. They stepped back as he was pushed to his knees at the foot of the steps. Looking up, he met Ketirah's gaze, disquieted to see a new exuberance shining in her eyes.

"I have visitors to see you, Captain," she chuckled. "Old friends." At the look of surprise which he tried to conceal, she broke into full blooded, vicious laughter. "Let him stand." The two, grey clad slaves removed brawny

hands from his shoulders and he rose, glancing to his right, then froze in shock. A young, green eyed woman brushed unruly ginger curls back from her face and smiled... but as he had never seen her smile before. A hint of cruelty lurked in her expression.

"Long time no see, Jim."

"Arwen? What... what are you doing here?" It was suddenly hard for Kirk to breathe.

"Well, it's like this, Jim... we've been away from home for a long time - too long." The mocking note in her voice was abruptly replaced by something harder. "We've come home, Captain. This is where we belong - with our people."

"Arwen..." Kirk could not believe this was happening. Then, relaxing, he turned to face Ketirah. "Another of your amusements, Ketirah? An illusion created for my benefit?"

"No illusion, Captain," a woman's voice replied. It was another voice he knew. He turned again to see Marianne Raesdal, once an Ensign on his own ship, standing beside the Tithoniél chief. "We're both real, all of us are." She gestured to those present and Kirk now realised that some of them were also familiar to him; he had transported them to Mardrata-va. "We're here, Captain, because we understand now. Gevron's people showed me the truth: any gifted humanoid, telepath or otherwise, cannot live alongside the ungifted, the 'dumb'. You want to destroy us." She smiled, almost wistfully. "That's why we have to destroy you first."

Angry now, Kirk faced Ketirah. "Very clever but it doesn't convince me. You've ransacked my memories; you can create an illusion of anyone I've ever known."

"True," the Vendasi leader agreed, unconcerned. "But if I did, the illusion would not be independent of me - and these are. Let them prove it to you. Marianne, enter the Human's mind - convince him."

Kirk, who had turned to look at the Casreem as Ketirah gave her order, thought he saw something in the Mardratan woman's violet eyes for just a moment: fear? No, he must have been mistaken; her expression showed only cruel anticipation.

"As you wish, Ketirah," she replied, sounding almost bored. Staring at her, Kirk braced himself for another mental assault by Ketirah. But this was different. After a few moments, he became aware of another mind - or was it group of minds - hovering at the edge of his consciousness, hesitating, then -

"Aaaaaagh!" The cry was torn from Kirk's throat as images of horror tore into his mind. But unlike before, he saw not his friends and crew in torment but strangers. They wore old clothes vaguely recalled from his studies of history - women, men, children - stretched on racks, hanging from trees, burning at stakes. Here was a woman pressed to death with heavy rocks, there another, forced to drink gallons of water till she died... all of them Mardratan. Victims of witchcraft persecutions or just being different. Their agonies, experienced and recalled by those who had evaded the torturers and passed them down to the present generation as a warning never to forget caution. The Casreem inheritance.

Over all the images and agony, Kirk had/sensed/felt Marianne's 'voice': *These are the ones who died at the hands of your people. These are the ones who cry for vengeance!*

Then he lost consciousness.

"Oh, forgive me, forgive me," Marianne moaned, tears spilling between her fingers as she sat, hunched over, her hands covering her face. Beside her, arm round the Casreem woman, Arwen tried to comfort her friend, sensing the guilt and distress of the rest of the group as they clustered in the lobby outside, onto which their various apartments opened.

At last, Marianne looked up, wiping away tears with the back of her hand. "He'll never forgive us," she said, brokenly. "I'll never forgive myself."

"We're all responsible, Mari, not just you. We had no choice."

"I know but... I initiated it, I led it. Did you sense the pent-up hatred, the grudges in all our minds? Those memories triggered that off - we fed that into his mind, too. We couldn't help ourselves but we did it! At least Malcolm's not a hypocrite; he's never pretended to like Humans."

"There are things in us none of us like; we have to live with them. Feelings from the past don't mean we hate Jim or Spock or -"

"Just the anonymous mass of humanity, right?" When Arwen did not answer, the Casreem woman continued. "All right, when this is over, we'll explain to him. We'll explain it was our subconscious - Humans have dark things there, too. Maybe he'll understand - intellectually. But in his heart he'll never be able to forgive us - and I don't blame him."

"What do you mean?" Arwen asked, a sinking sensation beneath her ribs.

"What I said. We came here to play a part, to watch his crew tortured while we applauded, until we could find some way to save them - most of them anyway. Well, after today that'll be the easy part, at least for me." Until now, Marianne had been staring at the opposite wall as she spoke but she suddenly faced Arwen. "Don't you see? We went into his mind: we showed him the horrors of our pasts, ours and his. When this is all over, how can he ever look at us again without remembering? It wasn't playacting - it had to be real or she would have known. What we did was the worst kind of rape, Arwen; we violated his mind. We don't even have a god we can pray to for forgiveness - and who else could forgive us?"

"But we did it to save him, to save his crew." Arwen found herself almost pleading with the entrenched certainty in her friend's eyes.

"I know that and so will he. But do the means justify the ends? This is different from the mental contact I've had with him and other Humans before - forcing our way in, creating images like that - next to mind killing, it's the worst crime in Casreem law. We're all guilty of that crime - all of us." Marianne stood and walked to the door then paused and turned to Arwen. "If the rest of this works out OK, we'll have saved him and his crew but I think we'll have paid a price - you especially."

"Me?" Startled, Arwen got to her feet.

"Before this, you and the Captain were friends. I don't think you can be again." With a shrug, Marianne left.

The truth of what her friend had said began to settle around Arwen like the folds of a heavy shroud. Stubbornly, she pushed it away - she had a job to do.

McCoy looked up uneasily as the door swung back and two servants entered. "What is this?" he demanded as they pulled him to his feet. "Get your hands off me." Moving to help him, Spock was halted by the entrance of a Vendasi.

"If you wish him to die, creature, move."

Knowing the woman had only to induce a heart attack or other physiological collapse, Spock desisted. The grinning Vendasi waited as McCoy was frogmarched outside before following. As the key turned in the lock, the Vulcan heard a voice he recognised, in the corridor.

"We're here to see the Vulcan."

"That creature? It's in here. What's your business?"

"Here's Ketirah's authority. We have... old scores to settle with him."

There was a pause, then the Vendasi woman spoke. "Seems to be in order. I'd watch if the main entertainment wasn't just starting. Here, take the key. But don't damage him permanently - Ketirah has something very special planned for him."

Flattened against the wall, Spock listened as footsteps retreated and the key once more jangled in the lock. The door began to swing toward him; he prepared to act...

Arms twisted behind him, McCoy was forced across the sand strewn arena toward an odd wooden structure erected at its centre, all the while protesting and cursing. Then he was released and a long wooden pole thrust into his hands. "Hey, wait a minute -" he began but the slaves had already raced from the arena. Bewildered and a little afraid, he looked around the otherwise empty arena and then up at the sea of faces staring down in silent, gloating anticipation.

He swallowed, feeling his stomach tighten, then recognised the figure seated beside a black clad woman. Jim! As their gazes locked, he could read the suffering in his friend's eyes even at that distance. A sudden murmur that swelled along the seated ranks distracted him; the woman in black got to her feet.

"Blue has been chosen!" she confirmed in a ringing voice. Another figure, clad in blue, rose and made his way to a box at one side of the arena: a place of honour, the Doctor realised. Once more, he looked around the arena, wondering what was in store for him. Was he supposed to fight? But the pole he had been given was light and flexible: hardly suited as a weapon. His eyes were drawn back to the wooden structure which he now saw consisted of two sets of wooden steps connected at their tops by a narrow beam. Around the base of the ladders, a circular fence hid the area beneath the beam from view. What did they want him to do... walk across? He was a Doctor, not a high wire artist. At that moment, he realised that he had begun to walk toward the nearest set of steps, although he had had no conscious intent to do so. And he could not stop.

The truth hit him: his limbs were being controlled. They were doing it. As he tried to fight the compulsion, a ripple of laughter broke out on the stone tiers above. He could not move a muscle... only they could. Sweat broke out on his forehead as he mounted the lowest steps, pole balanced in both hands. What did they have in mind - to make him fall off the beam and break his neck? Not very entertaining but maybe they were short of ideas by now.

At last he stopped, his head bowing to permit him to see that he was on the top step... and what lay below, previously hidden from view. A pit had been dug in the floor of the arena and into it had been lowered a tank of liquid... water, presumably. Under the hot sun its cool green depths looked inviting. Then he saw that shapes flashed in those depths, long, sinuous shapes. As he watched, one shot to the surface and snapped lazily at the object that floated there: the long white bone... the long white Human bone.

In that instant, Dr. Leonard McCoy knew exactly what they had in mind for him.

"Ah, I thought you would miss our special treat," Ketirah remarked as, flushed from hurrying, Arwen and Kledo settled into their places beside her. "I trust your business with the Vulcan was settled satisfactorily?"

"Very," Arwen replied nastily. She studiously avoided looking at Kirk, seated on the other side of the Vendasi. Instead, she gestured to the arena. "What's this - swimming lessons?"

"Not exactly," Ketirah responded. "The tank is stocked with emflunda: they can strip the flesh from an animal in twenty heart beats."

"Interesting," Kledo commented, to divert attention from the look of consternation that had appeared on Arwen's face.

"Bones..." she murmured.

"Yes, we've already opened the session with another of the Captain's people. But one of his friends! I shall be transmitting his emotional reaction to the experience as well as the subject McCoy's."

"I - I don't quite understand," Kledo covered. "Can you explain how it all works?"

Kirk's gaze was fixed helplessly on his friend below. He had already been forced to watch a young crewman die in the tank and Ketirah had laughed at the horror she had sensed in his mind when McCoy appeared. She had changed her mind about the executions, she had told him. Spock would be broken by artificially induced pon farr and then crucified as the climax to the weeks of events. Kirk would be crucified beside him. In contrast, McCoy's death would be mercifully quick, she had informed him - he should be grateful.

"Each faction nominates a contender every day of the entertainment, usually by vote or drawing of lots. Before each individual contest, we hold another draw. With a single animal subject, as now, one faction controls and transmits; where more than one is involved, a subject is allocated to each faction. Blue won this time; last time it was Red."

Arwen spoke at last. "I thought your factions were organised according to dominant talent. Does that mean you're all strong telepaths?"

"No, control like that is only possible, unaided, for the Greens - our telepath faction. The rest use power boosters - like this one on my belt."

Kirk's attention suddenly focused; an ember of hope stubbornly glowed into life in his heart.

"The boosters amplify all talents in proportion to the wearer's inborn ability. So, an individual, strong telepathically but weak at teleporting will be better able to teleport with the booster but still less powerful than the natural talent of a teleport faction member."

"Oh, I see. You preserve natural differentials," Arwen said thoughtfully.

"Of course. We are all different; there must be rank and degree in all abilities."

"But what about yourself, Ketirah?" Arwen asked smoothly. "From what we've seen, you're highly gifted all round."

"Occasionally such an individual is born," Ketirah confirmed, her voice smug. "Of course, she or he rises to a position of authority. When the family of council leaders declined in ability, I was already leader of the Greens and was duly elected council leader. My son Lorak will succeed me."

"Son? I thought you spoke of a daughter... on the ship?"

"Yes, Har." Ketirah grimaced. "A throwback we should have exiled to the wilderness years ago. She has little ability and no courage. Incidentally, it may interest you to know that I have instigated a search of our old records. There is a legend that a whole group of Har's kind left us millennia ago; perhaps they were your ancestors. If so, it is gratifying to know that their descendants have returned to our old stock. Perhaps their salutary experiences on the Humans' planet are responsible. Well, I think our people grow impatient - " Ketirah directed a brief meaningful look at the Blue candidate in the box; evidently, she had telepathed the signal to begin. "You should find this interesting. Although the Blue contestant controls the subject through his booster, the rest of his faction can 'listen' to the subject animal's responses. Normally, each faction tunes to its own subject but with single subjects, the other factions participate through my booster which is attuned to all."

"So... when you said the boosters amplify all the talents, this time they're acting as telepathic amplifiers?" Kledo asked.

"Precisely. The controlling candidate's mind links to those of his or her faction members via the booster. This time, however, we have the added richness of the Captain's reactions, so I expect most of us will keep switching between frequencies." Laughter punctuated her words on the tiers around them.

"Does - does that mean you couldn't link minds on a large scale before you developed this technology?" Arwen asked.

"That is correct. Our entertainments were far cruder then."

Below, McCoy took a step onto the beam, lurched sideways and wobbled dangerously. Somehow, with the aid of the pole he held, he kept his balance.

"What - what exactly is happening?"

Kirk thought he detected a note of strain in Arwen's voice but dismissed the thought; why should she care what happened to Bones when she had thrown in with these people?"

"Blue is forcing him one way then releasing control. When he regains balance, Blue will take control again. A lighter amusement between the more serious entertainment." Laughter once more echoed along the tiers as McCoy again listed to one side.

Eyes fixed on his friend, Kirk nevertheless became aware of a figure climbing the steps toward which McCoy was erratically heading; a dark haired figure in tunic and trousers and not the one piece garment of his captors or the slave grey. At the same instant, he heard a harsh intake of breath - either by Ketirah or Arwen.

"One of your party," the Vendasi leader snapped, her voice hard with suspicion. "What is she doing?"

McCoy, fighting to keep his balance, suddenly straightened up, righted himself, dropped his balancing pole and ran straight along the beam toward the Mardatan woman, as confidently as a trapeze artist. She seized his arm and almost dragged him down the steps; as she did so, Kirk was not alone in recognising her.

"Marianne!" Arwen groaned the name in horrified resignation.

"What is this treachery?" demanded Ketirah. Her hold on Kirk's mind and body relaxed momentarily at the distraction. Instinctively, he lunged at her but was brought up short to crash painfully to the pavement as she regained control.

"Stop them!" Kirk heard her cry. Then he was made to stand and, immobile, watch as the two Mardatan chiefs were fetched back, struggling. "Arrest their companions!" Ketirah commanded. A green clad woman nearby nodded before racing off. "So you are cowards after all - my daughter's kin." She struck Arwen heavily across the face. Lip bleeding and face red from the blow, Arwen turned her head to face the other woman, blinking back tears of pain. "What did you hope to achieve? To rescue these animals?"

Arwen looked past Ketirah to Kirk. "Jim, I'm sorry - " she cried, her voice filled with pain and regret. Understanding, Kirk willed his eyes to show that he did not blame her for anything. Then he noticed that Kledo was gazing blankly at the stone underfoot; shock or - ? The thought occurred to Ketirah at the same instant; she stepped forward and struck the Casreem chief on the neck. Groaning, he collapsed.

"No!" Arwen cried.

"He's not dead; he won't die that easily. He was transmitting to the rest of you cowards." Ketirah turned to face Kirk, her face twisted in fury. "You will die in the arena tomorrow - all of you. You and the ones you came to save - your precious Captain and his friends. Take them away!" she shouted. As Arwen was marched away, and Kledo dragged along behind her, the Vendasi leader grabbed Kirk roughly by the chin. "What is it about you animals that inspires such treachery?" She released him, pushing him away and he realised that he could speak for the moment.

"Why kill them too? They're your own kind - "

"No! Those - those things have degenerated until they are little better than you. They are traitors to their own blood." Furious, Ketirah turned away, compelling Kirk to follow.

"Come on Doctor!" Desperately, Marianne dragged the disoriented Human behind her as she ran from the arena, aware of Kledo's 'voice' broadcasting a general warning to the Casreem members of the link to establish individual shields around themselves and their partners and get out of the city. He followed that by a rapid tight-beam message which she realised was directed at Carolyn, Levi's Casreem partner. Then there was an abrupt end to the transmission: a void in the link where Kledo's presence normally dwelt. Shocked, Marianne would have risked a probe to discover if he were dead or merely unconscious but McCoy stopped, bringing her to a sudden halt. Seeing the blankness in his eyes, she jerked her hand free and backed away as he walked unsteadily toward her. Directing a mind probe at him, she encountered a force of hatred which she realised emanated from the arena behind them. Unable to help McCoy further, Marianne turned and ran, plunging into the mean streets of the poor quarter, and soon lost him in their maze. Kledo's earlier message to her had indicated that their contact would be found here.

Racing along the narrow passage, the Mardatan woman was aware of an assault on the group mind of which she was a part. Fantastically, the shield was holding up against the booster-directed mass mind probe but it could not last. The only hopeful note was Kledo's returned presence at the back of her mind: despite her own strong shield, she could sense the strain he was suffering, and only the mind pattern she had received from him earlier kept her on course.

At last, she stopped outside a small house, sensing her quarry within. Bursting into the ground floor room and startling its slave occupants, she tore upstairs. As she flung back the door to the upper room, a young woman in blue sprang from a chair and grabbed her booster belt buckle.

No, don't! Spock sent me! Marianne launched a telepathic cry.

The other woman halted, fear in her eyes. "What's happening? I could sense something earlier - "

Marianne shook her head, leaning against the door frame and gasping for breath. "No time to... explain. We must... get out of... the city now."

"But - I can't leave!" she cried in protest.

"You must!" Marianne insisted, keeping to speech in case the Vendasi had a way of picking up telepathic transmissions undetectably. "Ketirah's thugs... will be after me... We have to... contact the exiles. Come on!" Grabbing Har's arm, she dragged her down onto the street. "Which way?" she demanded.

The bewildered Vendasi woman headed off with Marianne struggling to keep up with her. Nervous slaves flattened themselves against walls as the two women ran down street after street, all identical. Eventually the houses began to thin out and a fresh smell of growing things wafted toward them on the breeze.

"We have... to stop," gasped Marianne, half collapsing against a wall.

"But... if Ketirah - "

Marianne held up her hand. After some moments, she managed to speak. "It's all right for you; I'd already run all the way from the arena." She grinned raggedly to show it was meant as a joke. Her companion, however, did not see it, nervously gazing back the way they had come.

"Let's move on... more slowly," the Mardratan said.

Soon they were following a path through cultivated fields where slaves toiled at backbreaking work. The Vendasi continued to glance nervously behind her. Marianne was silent, listening to the messages of her Casreem kin.

They're throwing the... lot at us Kledo telepathed. Shield can't... last much longer... The link was abruptly severed by a clamour of hate filled voices. Crying out, she clutched her hands to her head, staggering.

"What is it?" Har cried in alarm.

"They - breached the group shield." The paleness of Marianne's face emphasised her strange violet eyes. "They've got Kledo and Arwen and some of the others - unshielded." She turned aside to lean on the fence bordering the path. Har watched her anxiously for a moment then looked round at the toiling workers in the fields. When she looked back, Marianne had straightened. "Come on. We've got to meet Carolyn and Levi - and your exiles."

"Exiles?" Har echoed. "Why? What can they do?"

"Everything. We must get together as many of them as possible and bring them into the city tonight."

"The city? But - but you said - Ketirah will - "

Marianne stepped forward and caught Har by the arm. "Look, they're going to kill our friends tomorrow - my people and Captain Kirk and his friends. Kledo told me you were helping Spock; that's why I came to you."

"It's not that I don't want to help," Har said, helplessly. "I just don't know how."

Marianne smiled ruefully. "Stick with me and you'll find out."

Kirk stood, unable to move, forced to witness what was happening to the group of Mardratan captives. The lines of strain on Kledo's face as he fought to keep the shield intact deepened as beads of sweat rolled down the young man's face. Kirk had listened to Ketirah's ranting - how she would totally crush the Mardrata - with numb horror when she had first assembled her people in her 'throne' room, but then reprieve had come via an unexpected source: her son, Lorak, who had teleported into the room unnoticed. He had pointed out that the Mardratan captives might have useful information - such as the whereabouts of the other seventeen of them who were still at large. Once Ketirah's fury at how she had been deceived had abated sufficiently to permit her to concede the boy's point, she had given clear orders: when the shield was down, she wanted the minds on the far side of it to be intact. Thus only twenty of her Green faction had been detailed to bludgeon the Mardrata into submission while she stood stiffly by, arms folded and impatience clear in every line of her body.

A scream of pain suddenly echoed through the room but Kirk could not tell if it had been audible; it seemed, rather, to reverberate around his skull as if on the telepathic level. Ketirah strained forward, triumph dawning on her features. No words were spoken but the Captain sensed a fierce interrogation taking place as defenceless minds were ransacked for information. In moments, frustration and dissatisfaction replaced Ketirah's look of triumph, succeeded again by rage.

"Your friends will get nowhere with the exiles, that pack of spineless cowards," she vowed. "As for the 'device' made by this - Vulcan." She turned to Kirk, controlling her anger with an effort. "It seems my - daughter - has been helping Mr. Spock to construct something to jam our boosters - " She sensed the sudden elation which Kirk could not conceal. "A mere animal mind cannot equal our technological prowess. Hope all you want, Captain - it will not prevent

you and him dying on those crosses tomorrow. Can you hear the slaves at work?" As she paused, Kirk became aware of distant hammering. "You will never overcome us - mere animals cannot pose a threat to us!" Looking past her at the Mardratan women and men held securely in the grip of their torturers, Kirk saw Arwen and the others writhe, faces twisted in pain, their minds still possessed. Any trace of the anger and hurt he had felt earlier at their apparent treachery had now evaporated. "You will all die - in the greatest spectacle that my people have ever seen. Every last one of your accursed breed."

Kirk abruptly refocused on her words: all! When she had made that threat earlier, he had assumed that she meant only those of his crew already scheduled to die; he now understood that even those intended as breeding stock were to share the same fate. To reinforce the message, Ketirah forced an image into his mind: his crew would be divided into four armies and pitted against each other in batches of ten in a relentless conflict. He, Spock and McCoy, together with the Mardrata, would be crucified in a great circle around the circumference of the arena - but he would live long enough, she promised him, to see the last of his crew fall to the blood soaked arena. She had taken the idea from him, she told him - a Roman entertainment, execution and public spectacle blended into a new Vendasi amusement. He saw her vast megalomania in that instant: they had humiliated her and they would all die - it was that simple. His only consolation was that Spock would be spared the degradation and suffering originally planned and which Ketirah's impatience would not now permit.

Restless, Kirk turned over on the couch which served him as a bed. Stars twinkled between the bars which the Vendasi's slaves had placed over the opening above the fountain. He got up to splash water on his face; as he did so, he heard shouts and running feet in the distance. Listening intently, he glanced up at the patch of sky overhead and quickly moved back out of range. A small, humanoid shape now blotted out some of the stars.

"Captain? It's all right, I won't harm you." Lorak's voice was eager with excitement.

"I'm pleased to hear it. What do you want?"

"I've come to tell you that the armoury's been raided. They've taken all the wands. It must have been your friends."

Hope momentarily surged up in Kirk but he restrained it, recollecting the boy's deceitful nature. He realised that Lorak was referring to the weapons only used by Vendasi raiders - like the one used to kill the security guards on Sigma Orionsis IV, and stun him on the decoy ship. He regarded the boy's shape steadily.

"It's not a trick," Lorak assured him, sounding amused. "And I haven't come to kill you this time. Mother would be furious with me - she's saving you for tomorrow." With a laugh, he abruptly showered dead leaves off the flat roof and through the barred opening with a sweep of his arm. Kirk stepped back to avoid them and, still laughing, Lorak disappeared. Slowly, Kirk wandered back to the couch and sat down. If Lorak had told the truth, Marianne and whatever force she had managed to assemble would stand a better chance of pulling off a rescue. But unless Spock's device worked... and he could have had no opportunity to put that to the test... they would be hopelessly outnumbered.

He eyed the patch of night sky; it seemed a little lighter. In a few hours, he would find out...

The clear blue sky promised another hot day as Kirk marched under mind control into the arena. Ahead, the wooden crosses lay on the arena floor, a captive Mardratan standing, shoulders slumped like a broken doll, beside each. As he approached, he noticed the pallor of their faces and the glazed look in their eyes: each was flanked by two Vendasi who, do doubt, controlled them, though they did not look capable of resistance. His own escort took him to a cross directly opposite Ketirah's usual seat. Nearby stood Arwen, the side of her face swollen by the Vendasi leader's blow and her ginger hair more dishevelled than ever, but when her green eyes met his for a moment, he thought he saw a spark of defiance in their depths.

Turned to face into the arena by his Vendasi guards, Kirk was able to see McCoy and Spock emerging from the entrance tunnel. The Doctor's face was blank, denoting control, but Spock's was merely shuttered and unreadable. He seemed to be moving of his own volition, glancing around him as he walked and Kirk recalled Har's explanation of the distaste felt for the Vulcan by the Vendasi. From the Mardratan presence, Spock must realise that the existence of his jamming device had been revealed, yet he showed no concern. Kirk wondered if his friend would fight back rather than submit - but then, that would not be logical in face of the overwhelming odds: the Vendasi would surely overcome their squeamishness if he tried to escape. His two friends were, he realised, being directed to the crosses on either side of him. As the Vulcan approached, their eyes met for a moment and Kirk thought he read an attempt at reassurance in

Spock's but then the Vulcan was gone from his field of vision.

A mood of cruel anticipation emanated from the tiers above - a blood thirsty longing for revenge. It seemed that the Blue faction member controlling McCoy when Marianne had struck, was dead, his mind burned out by the sheer ferocity of the Mardratan woman's attack. It was probably thanks to that that she had escaped - and the other sixteen - the stunned Vendasi had had to break their mind link hurriedly, reeling with shock. Remembering Marianne's instinctive attack on the Vendasi boy in defence of Ensign Surrey, Kirk was sure it had been unintentional; Marianne probably did not realise that she had killed again.

"Crucify them!" Ketirah's voice rang out, met by a roar of approval echoed on the mental level until Kirk felt that his skull were vibrating in sympathy. He found himself lying down on the prone cross, his arms moving to rest on the crossbeam of their own volition though he fought with all his will against it. The sharp point of a nail pressed against each of his palms, and he steeled himself, sensing rather than seeing the heavy wooden mallets in the hands of the slaves, poised to fall...

There was a strange vibration in the air, a prickling sensation behind Kirk's forehead... an odd heaviness like the prelude to a thunderstorm. Simultaneously, cries of alarm rang out above him and he could see Vendasi leaping to their feet. Abruptly there was a loosening of mental control upon him as the two Vendasi guards stumbled back clutching at their belt buckles in dismay and moaning in sudden fear. Kirk surged to his feet, fists bunched, but neither they nor the slaves seemed disposed to fight; the grey clad figures had dropped their mallets and were staring in confusion at the figures on the tiers.

"Spock!" Kirk spun the face the Vulcan, a delighted grin on his face. His friend, also on his feet, merely raised an eyebrow. "Spock, your device worked!"

"It would seem so, Captain. However, I suggest we remove ourselves speedily before the advantage of surprise is lost."

Nodding, Kirk turned to help McCoy and the others but the Doctor had already recovered his wits and was bending over one of the Mardratans who had collapsed.

"Jim, he's in a bad way - " As Kirk hurried over, he saw that the stricken individual was Kledo.

"He took the brunt of their attack, Bones." The speaker was Arwen who was motioning to one of the other Mardratan women. "We have to get out of here." She and the other woman lifted the semi-conscious chief, placing his arms round each of their shoulders. Aware that the other Mardrata were already stumbling toward the tunnel, Kirk brought up the rear, ready for trouble from the Vendasi guards. As they left, a couple seemed to come to their senses sufficiently to realise that the prisoners were escaping, but as they lunged for them, Kirk sidestepped and brought the edge of his hand down on the first man's neck while Spock dealt a neckpinch to the second. Then they were into the tunnel, the sunlight and the uproar of the Vendasi benches behind them.

They hurried along the tunnel, Kirk and McCoy offering to take Kledo but Arwen declined. "You have to find your people and get them out. Don't worry about us, Jim; we'll head for our ship. The landing area is two blocks west from here; I think that ship's the best way of getting the Enterprise back. They've got a skeleton crew aboard but four of our teleporters got away - if they can get aboard, they might be able to beam some of your crew back."

"Right, Arwen. Take care of yourselves." They blinked, emerging into bright sunlight, the Mardratans heading off to the right.

"Captain, since the Doctor and myself were confined in a cell here, it seems logical to suppose that others are here also. I will remain and attempt to free them."

"Spock, it's too risky," McCoy put in. "They'll be howling for our blood any second now."

"No, Bones, Spock's right. But I'll stay."

"Captain," the Vulcan said quietly. "Do you know of any other location where crew members are being held?"

Kirk looked at his friend, suppressing a sigh as he realised where this line of questioning would lead. "Yes, Spock," he admitted reluctantly. "Ketirah took me to see the 'breeding pens' and I noticed another cell block nearby."

"Then, logically, you and the Doctor should go there. I will release the prisoners here and rendezvous with you at the landing area described by Ms Tiethoniél."

"All right, Spock - but take care."

As Kirk and McCoy hurried away, the Doctor mumbled, "Stubborn Vulcan. Those Vendasi'll be mad enough to tear him limb from limb." As if to verify his words, the shouts of shocked confusion behind them were changing to blood-curdling howls of mindless rage. Running, Kirk tried not to think of the terrible danger facing his friend; besides sheer mob violence, the Vendasi would still have their individual abilities. He led the panting Doctor down a side road and then down another, sliding to a halt outside a wide stone building, clouds of dust rising around his feet.

"This it, Jim?"

"These are the breeding pens and that - " Kirk gestured to an edifice nearby, "is where most of our people are being held. You take this one - the keys are in the small office at the front."

McCoy nodded and disappeared inside. Remembering his own reaction to the sight within, Kirk knew how his friend would feel at being confronted by the large, straw-filled wooden stalls with their naked, manacled occupants. But the Doctor's task should be easier; only about eighty Enterprise personnel were confined there. Taking a deep breath, Kirk entered the other building.

Inside, the place was cool and dim. His eyes adjusting to the reduced lighting, he noticed a group of slaves eyeing him in confusion and alarm. Taking advantage of their reaction, he told them that the prisoners were to be released. One came forward.

"You are not Vendasi," she said.

"No," Kirk admitted. "But I need the keys to the cells," he added, kindly but firmly.

Then young woman frowned, looking from him to her more timid companions. "I... I felt something just now. Then the master who was here, ran away screaming. What is happening?"

"The Vendasi are not your masters - you can resist them. Will you help me?" Kirk waited, sensing a less cowed spirit in the woman before him than in the others who gasped with horror.

"Zhodal, don't listen to him," one of the men insisted. "He's one of the strangers. He'll be killed like the rest of them and our masters will only kill you for helping him."

Zhodal looked at the man, then at Kirk. Abruptly, she broke into a run, heading down a small passage and through a doorway at the far end.

"Stop her!" the man yelled.

"I'll fetch the masters!" another shouted but Kirk moved quickly to intercept him and he shrank back, afraid, to where the other slaves stood. As the young woman returned carrying large bunches of keys, they began to quiver with fright.

"Zhodal, they'll kill us all," whispered the man who had tried to escape.

"Go into the attendant room. I will lock you in and the masters will not kill you. They cannot kill slaves for obeying. Go on." With frightened looks at her and each other, the slaves bolted into the room from whence Zhodal had fetched the keys. She followed to lock them in, then returned and handed two bunches of keys to Kirk. "For the East cells - this part. I will take West."

"Thank you." Intrigued, Kirk added. "Why are you helping me?"

The woman frowned again, perplexed. "I... do not know, really. But... I don't like being a slave." She smiled suddenly, revealing a gap between her teeth. "I have never liked being a slave," she said, more definitely, before moving away with her keys.

Moving rapidly along the rows of cells, Kirk soon discovered that each key fitted ten cells. Figures in Starfleet uniforms stumbled out of the gloomy rooms, blinking in the comparative brightness of the passage. Their first confused mumbles grew into exclamations of delight as they realised who had released them. Zhodal soon returned, at the head of a large straggling crowd and Kirk could see that most of his crew were now reunited. Then McCoy entered, leading the young people who had been selected for breeding, their flesh sore with the marks where they had worn ankle and neck chains. But they were overjoyed to see the rest of the crew who willingly divested themselves of shirts or trousers or

dresses until there was quite a gathering of half dressed, laughing people. While this was in progress, Kirk questioned Zhodal, his attention on the still-empty road outside.

"Yes, there is a door at the back; I will show you."

"Good." Kirk closed the front door of the building, bolting it. Bringing his crew to attention, he briefly outlined the current situation to them. Then they filed quietly and quickly after the slave woman, their sense of discipline still intact despite their ordeals so that Kirk felt a surge of pride in his people even though concern for Spock was ready to overwhelm it. And even though he had spoken confidently to the crew about regaining the Enterprise, he knew that would take some doing. Confirming his fears, distant shouts sounded, growing louder and accompanied by a rumbling as of thunder... but thunder which rolled on and on without pause. The thunder of many feet running - thousands of them. Not needing to be told, the Enterprise crew members quickened their pace...

The slaves had fled in terror from the arena when their all-powerful owners had suddenly been smitten by uncharacteristic panic. Now they crouched shivering in the arena master's office, too afraid even to notice when a stranger slipped in to take the keys and just as silently departed. Their shuddering bodies pressed closely together for illusory protection as the screams of rage outside grew more frenzied. And they died without the chance to plead or even scream as their minds were torn apart in an instant by other minds too white hot with fury to contemplate expediency let alone justice.

Ketirah and the green faction members accompanying her, slumped against the wall, momentarily satiated. "The Humans... must die," the Vendasi leader said huskily, then kicked the nearest frozen faced corpse. "I will have blood - Human blood - but most of all - " Her ever-growing panic and fury flared up again, only momentarily dampened by what it had done to a slave's mind. "Those Mardratans - and Har. My own flesh has betrayed me!" Unable to bear inaction any longer, she raced from the room, toward the sunlit street.

The sunbaked streets of the Vendasi city began to fill with the fear-crazed horde, pouring like a poisoned river but in reverse - one tributary flowing toward the slaves' quarter, the other toward the cells and breeding pens. Thousands of minds, all splintered from each other for the first time in living memory - for the first time in thousands of years - but all remarkably alike in their monstrous aching for blood. Those who had stripped them of their omnipotence - though of course only temporarily - would pay in pain. While the innocent slaves would die just for being there, for being alien like the Human and Mardratan enemies temporarily out of reach.

All this Marianne saw and understood from her perch on the rooftops of the palace. Instantly, she communicated her knowledge to her companions: the weapons stolen for their own defence must now defend the slaves. Stun-force -

No! Har's mind contradicted, over-riding Marianne's instruction. Exiles, you'll never be free of them if you don't kill them now! You have to do it - they won't be content to leave you alone now!

Har's right. The mind voice of Har's contact, Dwield, spoke with calm resignation. They'd hunt us down like animals if we spared them - jammer or not there are still too many of them. And when will we ever get another chance like this to be rid of their threat forever? Even before he finished, beams of orange light were jabbing down from the rooftops hitting racing figures who faltered, fell and were trampled by their heedless fellows.

Even stun-force would kill in a stampede like that, Tasra told Marianne though the new mindlink forged by the seventeen escaped Mardrata. They outnumber us by about twenty-five to one; we have to use the wands.

Marianne uncovered her face. I know... it's just - all the KILLING. I'm so sick of it. And the Exiles used us - they meant to wipe out the Vendasi all the time.

We feel the same, Levi Telkma comforted her. We're Mardratans: we're not made for this. But we might have known the exiles would do something like this - after all, this is their fight, their world. We're just here to get our friends out.

Have you made contact with the others yet, Marianne? asked Tasra.

Marianne suppressed a mental sigh, forcing herself to ignore the carnage on the streets below. Yes, I reached Michael. They're at the landing area waiting for the Humans to arrive.

Right, Tasra asserted, her presence a strong reviving force in the link. *That's where we're needed. The teleporters among us will be in better shape than those with Arwen - and if we're all to get out of here, Captain Kirk must get his ship back!*

With one mind, the Mardrata began to hurry over the flat roofs toward the landing area. Below, the crazed Vendasi screamed and killed with their minds and died...

"I suggest that now would be the optimum time to depart," Spock commented dryly. The huge mob which had burst from the arena shortly after he had successfully got his band of about thirty Enterprise crew members clear, had obliged him and the others to hide in some storage bins of grain. Now, however, the mob was racing away in the opposite direction and seemed to be under attack.

The others began to emerge from the bins, grain streaming off them like water. As they dropped lightly over the sides into the street and began to steal away in the direction in which Arwen's band had headed, a band of Vendasi stragglers spotted them and gave chase.

Two blocks west... Spock led the group of Enterprise women and men at a run toward the landing area. As he speculated on the best course of escape, he spotted a ginger haired figure running toward him. Seeing the mob of fifty or so pursuers behind his band, she abruptly stopped then, standing her ground, clenched her fists, her face strained in concentration. The mob behind her faltered, its leaders stopping and being bowled over by those behind. In the resulting confusion, the Enterprise people raced around the corner except for Spock who stopped to walk with Arwen, his curiosity piqued. She backed slowly toward the corner, her attention on the milling Vendasi behind them. Once round it, Spock and she exchanged a brief understanding glance and hurried after the rest.

Ahead lay the landing area, dotted with Vendasi craft. Weaving confidently between them, Arwen suddenly swayed; Spock steadied her, inquiring if she was all right.

"I think so. That illusion took it out of me after - well, I think you can guess what they did to us."

Spock's nod spoke far more than profuse speeches of sympathy. "May I ask which illusion you projected just now?"

"We just disappeared for them; I couldn't really manage anything fancier than that right now. It did the trick didn't it? It's a good job I got worried and came to look for you - must be my precog streak again." At Spock's enquiring look, she smiled. "It's what started this all off - a couple of precog dreams about Ketirah torturing Jim, that sort of thing. We put some pressure on Starfleet and when you vanished - well, here we are. What about Jim and Bones - why aren't they with you?"

Spock explained as they walked on, the Mardratian ship suddenly visible ahead of them with the Enterprise crew and Mardratans standing outside. Mr Scott emerged as they arrived.

"She'll not take much above thirty, Mr Spock, and that's a squeeze," he reported.

Spock nodded. "It may be better to use one of the Vendasi ships for the purpose I have in mind." Quickly, he explained.

"Och, it might work at that - sounds like our only chance. But," Scott looked at Arwen, "can your people operate the transporter?"

"I'll ask." Arwen went over to question the two Madeshiel members of her group and returned after a moment. "They think the teleporters in the other party could be talked through it via the link - Marianne knows how to operate the transporter. And she's on her way here now."

"Marianne? Aye, the lass who served on the Enterprise. Me and Ensign Schweitzer will check out the other ships then."

"Very good, Mr Scott." As the Chief Engineer and the woman he had mentioned went to check which of the Vendasi ships could be readied quickly, Michael, one of the Casreem, announced that Marianne and her group had bypassed the mob and would be joining them within minutes. After a short and tense wait, Arwen could restrain herself no longer and went dodging away between the ships to the edge of the landing site. When the band of Mardrata came into view, she and the dark haired woman at their head both broke into a run at the same moment and, laughing, flung their arms around each other. All talking at once, the group expressed their relief at being back together again as they hurried toward the

ship. Marianne asked Arwen about Kledo whom Michael had told her not to contact.

"As far as we can tell, it's just mental 'bruising' but it'll be a while before he can bear telepathic contact with anyone - maybe Carolyn can help?" Arwen added, referring to the Casreem mental healer. Then the other Mardratans were hurrying forward to welcome them. Spock waited patiently for the hugs and joyful greetings to die down before putting his idea to Marianne.

"I'll do it," she said, simply, then rejoined Arwen as Spock turned away to consult Mr Scott. "To tell the truth, Arwen, I'll be glad to get away from all this killing for a while... The exiles are massacring the Vendasi and the Vendasi are slaughtering the slaves."

Arwen's eyes widened in surprised horror. "I hope the rest of the Enterprise crew don't get mixed up in that. According to Spock, Jim and Bones went to rescue them." As she finished speaking, Tasra hurried up to them anxiously.

"It's Captain Kirk and the others," she said, urgently. "I've had a precog that they're in trouble - or will be shortly!"

The narrow streets of the slave quarter were completely jammed with people. Vendasi screaming for blood were mind broadcasting their hatred or telekinetically flinging stones and other missiles through the air. Hundreds of slaves unable to escape in time lay dead, their bodies trampled underfoot by a mass which could not avoid them even if it had wished. From the flat roofs above, death continued to stab down so that Vendasi corpses were also crushed though soon the press became so great the dead were held upright by the living around them. A few more rational Vendasi had attempted to reach the roofs - though not to escape but to kill. Most who had climbed or levitated had been shot down but the teleporters had been luckier and had hurled a few Exiles to their deaths till they too had joined their victims. As the pressure in the streets below grew from those at the rear pushing onward, many Vendasi suffocated where they stood. And still the exiles coldly, rationally, rained death upon them because they reasoned that they could not afford to let them live.

Auel shook his head in bewilderment on the edge of the vast, shocked and sorrowing crowd. The news brought from the city by the few hundred terrified slaves who had escaped the massacre of their fellows and families had fallen as a heavy blow upon those who worked in the fields. The Vendasi masters had on occasion sent a few dozen slaves to the arena when they had grown short of other victims but the slaves' docility had usually spared them such a fate. They had believed that total obedience would safeguard them from the torture and death the Vendasi had meted out to countless strangers. But now... What madness had befallen their masters to act so and what could stop them from leaving the city and killing the farm workers also? Terror and confusion paralysed the slaves, more and more of them gathering into large groups as the news spread across the fields. Despite his usual mental lethargy, a growing sense of urgency was filling Auel: something must be done. But what?

Kirk, leading his three hundred and fifty-odd crew members through the streets, had preferred speed to stealth in view of their number. Yet the need to avoid the congested centre of the city meant that the route they were taking toward the landing area was a circuitous one. Before long, the noise of the second mob, which had headed for the prison block, grew louder and louder behind Kirk's people. Wishing for a stack of phasers, Kirk could only hurry his people on. But the dead end around the next corner sent his heart into his boots. As the Enterprise people spun round to retrace their steps, they could see that they were too late: the forefront of the mob was already surging around the last corner.

Backing his people into the dead end, Kirk looked desperately round for a way out. The buildings were not too high and looked climbable - but there would not be time for them all to escape. Rapidly, he organised the security personnel into a defensive wall armed with whatever weapons they could snatch from the ground - stones, sticks. Behind them, crew members began to climb. It was hopeless - yet he refused to abandon hope.

The mob, seeing its victims cornered, rounded the corner into the dead end, screaming for blood.

Orange pencil-thin beams of light stabbed down from the sky, scything into the foremost ranks. Dead before they could register more than a look of surprise, Vendasi dropped like felled oaks to be trampled underfoot. More Vendasi stumbled and fell over the bodies and yet more fell to the orange beams. Enterprise crew members continued to climb doggedly to the safety of the roofs while the security wall backed into the emptying space. More and more of the

oncoming mob were bowled over and trampled, those behind climbing over the corpses. A torrent of orange death seared the air before Kirk and the others, dazzling them as they backed tighter and tighter into the remaining space. Kirk suddenly realised that where there might have been a dozen beams a second when their defenders had begun, there were now many times that number. The Vendasi reached the remaining Humans and grappled with them, the telepaths among them projecting their hatred and fear in mind-killing bursts. Kirk pushed McCoy who had remained behind, up the adjacent wall, turning to karate chop an attacking Vendasi. Around him, those of the security guards who were fortunate were now swarming up the sides of the buildings - though some were seized by their ankles and pulled back down. Kirk lunged upwards, seized a window ledge and pulled himself up. Beside him, McCoy was struggling upwards, also but he suddenly slipped and fell. Desperately, Kirk tried to grab him but was too late -

But McCoy was suddenly bobbing up beside Kirk, a look of mixed alarm and surprise on his face. "Jim, what the hell -" the Doctor said then disappeared upwards. Trying to follow, Kirk realised that a levitating Vendasi had grabbed him by the leg. He lashed out, trying to get free, and dislodged the man temporarily but as he climbed higher, he was again seized. But strong hands reaching from above, grasped him and between his own efforts and that of the helper above, he got free. Reaching the roof, he was delighted to see that it was his First Officer who had got him clear and that McCoy, too, was safe; seeing Suzanna Jaesdal he suddenly realised who had saved the Doctor. Enterprise personnel were climbing away over the flat roofs toward the large open space where spaceships could be seen parked. Other figures on the roof were single-mindedly firing at those below, determined expressions on their calm, strangely sad faces. And those faces - male, female, young, old - were all curiously alike in a way that spoke of strong kinship sealed in long endurance - the exiles, Kirk realised. Only one was different, clad in the blue jumpsuit of a Precog faction member instead of brown homespun rags, her dark hair wild around her strained, tear stained face.

"Har." Kirk would have gone to her but a hand on his shoulder halted him. He turned to see Arwen; other Mardratans were following his crew. Moving away with the Vulcan and Tithoniél chief, Kirk listened to Spock's news. Behind them, the exiles and Har continued to shoot the struggling Vendasi.

The fairhaired woman sitting in Kirk's command chair leaned forward. "What's happening down there?" she demanded frustratedly for the third time.

The woman gazing into the library computer hood straightened, rubbing her neck to try and ease tension. "Sensors show vast masses of people - our people - moving across the city at speed. Some are in the slave quarters." She shrugged, expressing confusion. "And slaves are migrating into the farmlands. I don't understand it."

"Look again. Romec, can you get any response?" The woman directed her question to the man at the communications station. The mass mindlink in which they had all shared as a preliminary to the entertainment about to commence below had been abruptly severed, and the Red faction member who had teleported down as soon as this had happened, had failed to return or to contact them in any way. "Mass failure by boosters?" she muttered to herself. If so it was obviously restricted to the planet's surface as booster augmentation aboard the Enterprise was not affected. They could group link among themselves but they could not contact anyone below.

"Olace," the woman at the science station gasped. Olace reacted to the horror in her voice, striding across to her.

"What is it?"

"They're dying - hundreds of them - our people dying." The woman looked up meeting Olace's shocked gaze. "The ones in the slave area - they're dying."

"How? Disease? What is it?" Behind her, Olace sensed Romec and the navigator, Brosvia, leaving their seats. "Back to your posts," she ordered. The woman before her returned to her sensor scan.

"It's... confused. There are dead slaves too - a lot of them but... I'm reading a massive discharge of energy in that area. I - I think someone's using wands - against us."

Olace reflexedly grasped the handle of the wand at her belt. "A slave uprising? The slaves using wands?"

"Perhaps -" The man at the communications station spoke. "You remember what Stozac said last night. There was a raid on the armoury - they thought it was the exiles and those... creatures who befriended the Humans."

"Yes, Romec, that must be it. Jithan, pinpoint the Humans. We might not be able to kill the exiles but the Humans are a different matter. Brosvia, prime the phaser banks."

"Phaser banks ready," the navigator responded.

"Wait - Olace, there's a ship coming up - it's on an intercept course."

"Scan it. Is it an alien vessel?"

"No..." Jithan sounded puzzled. "It's one of ours... and its slowing. It think it's - yes, it'll take up orbit alongside us."

"What about lifeforms - scan, quickly!"

"Vendasi... or - "

"Jithan! What is it? Quick!"

"I'm - it's almost as if they're not quite - and there's a Human too - no, several - "

Olace bounded back to her command chair. "Brosvia, lock onto that ship!"

The other woman turned to look at her. "But our people - "

"No, not ours! The aliens! The Humans aboard prove that. Now do as I say!"

Brosvia swung round to her board. "Locked on."

Olace opened her mouth to give the order to fire but it was never spoken. Orange light stabbed out from the bridge entrance enveloping both her and the navigator. As Romec and Jithan half rose from their chairs, reaching for their own wands, they, too, were hit by the stun-force.

Marianne, we've got the ones on the bridge but there may be more, the man reported via the link. His companion was already securing the Vendasi.

There was one in the transporter room but he's been taken care of, Marianne told them. Mr Scott and the others will be beaming over to you in a minute.

Right.

We can't let them come round, his companion pointed out. Even without these. She held out the detached power buckles.

We'll beam them down to the planet. Let's get 'em into the lift.

"Har, come on - we're going."

Dwield tugged at the young woman's sleeve but she ignored him, eyes fixed on the carnage below and locked in her own private hell. Dwield glanced anxiously along the roof and raised his wand to deal with a dark haired man who was climbing over the parapet. The man fell back, struck by Dwield's beam of death but was replaced by two more. Despite the slaughter, Vendasi were still swarming over the mountain of bodies below and attempting to climb the walls. And some had teleported or floated upward from the street beyond this dead end, taking some of Dwield's people by surprise. About fifty exiles had fallen and the alarmed survivors were now withdrawing. And the Vendasi had become deathly quiet after their former hysteria, seeming to regain their wits at last as if their emotions had been burnt out by an overload of fear, anger and hatred. Now joint assaults were being launched by groups of them against specific parts of the roof - and it was these assaults which had helped claim so many exile lives. A growing sickness gripped the pit of Dwield's stomach: where were the rest of the Vendasi? Their original number had been about ten thousand strong and he reckoned at least three thousand of those had perished in the attack on the slaves. Perhaps two thousand more bodies now choked the street below. That left half their number still alive somewhere. Someone was holding them back - had Ketirah regained control? Seeing Vendasi cutting off the avenue of escape, Dwield sprayed them with orange fire and grabbed Har's arm. "Come on."

As Har pushed him away, a black and silver clad figure appeared in front of them, her mouth in a wide and wicked smile. Dwield felt the instant surge of terror and hatred from Har and realised that he was face to face with the

Vendasi leader. Instinctively, he teleported as far as his strength would allow. Paralysed by horror, Har suddenly knew all the exiles had gone, the shock snapping her awake. She reached for her booster buckle and cried out as she realised its uselessness, then whirled to flee, but found herself surrounded. Her wand was ripped from her hand.

She's mine! The mental command snapped by Ketirah intruded into Har's mind - as it was intended to, she realised. Shaking with fright, she saw their cruel pitiless eyes boring into her.

"Noooo!" she wailed, collapsing to her knees and raising her arms above her head to shut them out.

Get up! A strong hand dug into her forearm and pulled her roughly to her feet. *Salve! Coward. The Humans showed more courage than you!* Ketirah turned to face Stozac and exchanged a few terse telepathic bursts with him which Har was unable to catch. The watch leader moved away. *Hold her,* the Vendasi leader commanded a red clad woman who twisted Har's arms painfully behind her. Ketirah then tapped Har's wand against her own palm. *I shall have to give your death careful consideration. What is fitting for a wretch who has participated in the massacre of her own people? There must be something sufficiently inventive... something painfully slow... which can be improvised even with the limited resources currently at our disposal.* Har trembled but said nothing, wide brilliant blue eyes fixed on her mother.

We could cut all the skin off with this, the mental voice of Lorak suggested. Har suddenly noticed him standing to one side, smiling his sly and secret smile, a sharp edged dagger in one hand. He kissed the blade, gaze fixed on Har to relish her reaction. She swallowed and looked away.

We must move against the Humans first. I especially want Kirk. There was a note of wrath in Ketirah's hitherto cold and emotionless 'voice'. Bring her.

"There was nothing I could do - I had to get out fast," Dwield concluded regretfully.

"I see." Kirk nodded, his expression one of concern. The sound of the transporter abruptly alerted him. He spun quickly to see twin forms coalescing a few feet away, one Human in shape, the other low and square. Dwield raised his wand but Kirk caught his arm. "It may be a friend. Spock sent a ship to try to regain control of the Enterprise." Dwield looked uncertain but lowered the wand. Around them, Mardratans and Enterprise personnel warily drew back while the exiles, perched on vantage points on the nearby ships, divided their attention between keeping a lookout and seeing what this possible new threat could be.

The shimmering shapes stabilised, becoming the familiar form of Marianne, standing beside a large crate. The delighted Mardratans crowded forward but the Casreem woman stepped away to speak to Kirk. "The Enterprise has been regained, Captain - " The rest of her words were swallowed by a cheer from those around. Kirk realised that he was grinning with relief - and something he could not define exactly but it was an emotion he often felt when his ship was in trouble, a fierce protectiveness.

"I brought this with me," Marianne continued when she could be heard, turning back to lift the lid of the silver crate. "I thought you'd find them useful." Looking inside, Kirk saw that it was filled with phasers.

"Understatements are usually Mr Spock's province, Ms Raesdal." As he reached for a phaser, Marianne handed him a communicator. Twinkling with delight, his eyes met hers and brought a blush and a sheepish smile to her face. Leaving Spock to supervise distribution of the phasers, Kirk then contacted his ship.

Scott's heartening voice responded to his call. "We've beamed down all the Vendasi we found up here, Captain and we've got enough people to man the bridge 'n' transporter room. We can start beaming up the crew right now."

"What about the Vendasi down here? Can you pinpoint them on the sensors?"

"Aye, sir. There's a large crowd of them, 'bout five thousand or so, making right for ye..." There was a pause while another voice spoke in the background. "Captain, they're splitting up - they seem to be tryin' to encircle the landing area. I think they know what they're doing now."

"Right, Scotty. Stand by to beam up personnel." Kirk moved quickly away to organise the transportation: essential maintenance and bridge personnel, with the exceptions of Spock and himself, would be beamed up first, while the remaining security people and other crew members not immediately required aboard were deployed to stand guard, the security teams running off to the edges of the field. All phasers were to be set on heavy stun; Kirk wanted no more killing. Those beaming up first took their places on the chosen spot and Kirk again contacted the ship to give the

go-ahead. The first batch of transportees shimmered into non-existence and the next quickly took its place.

The beaming up proceeding calmly and efficiently, Kirk handed over his communicator to Spock.

"Captain, I strongly advise -"

"Spock, we know Ketirah's still alive. If I keep her talking for a while, it'll buy time to get our people aboard." At the back of Kirk's mind, he pictured Har's serious, concerned face and wondered what might be happening to her now - if she were still living. A pang of guilt crossed his mind at the thought of how he had allowed himself to be led away; he should have stayed to persuade her to give up the killing. As if the Vulcan had read his thoughts, Spock replied with a quiet objection.

"Jim, I, too, regret that Har was taken prisoner. If she had not risked herself to obtain the equipment I required, the jammer would not have been possible." He fingered the small compact device which Levi had relinquished to him when Marianne's group had joined them. "But Ketirah regards us as animals and therefore her word cannot be trusted. No bargain with her can save Har if she is still alive."

"I understand, Spock... I wasn't planning to play the martyr." Kirk gave a brief, constrained smile. "Look after things here for me," he said, meeting his friend's eyes for a moment, then moved away. The Vulcan understood him only too well and knew that he had not really needed that subtle reminder that his first duty was to his crew and his ship. And yet Spock also knew that some small guilty part of Kirk's mind had been goading him to save Har - and that he would try if it were at all possible.

At the north side of the landing field, Kirk halted. Where were the security guards that he had detailed here? He whirled, meaning to ask the brown clad figure sitting against the tail fin of a sleek Vendasi scoutship, but suddenly realised that there was something wrong about the exile's posture. As he spun back to face the street beyond, he saw that about twenty Vendasi were grouped before him, Ketirah at their centre, pointing a wand straight at him. Behind the group, hundreds of Vendasi began trickling from the buildings and from around the corner, moving slowly to stand behind their leader. With a stab of pity, Kirk saw Har stumbling along in front of one of them, her hands bound behind her. The figure pushing her on - Lorak, Kirk saw - shoved her hard so that she fell to her knees in front of Ketirah. The boy then grabbed his sister by the hair, forcing her head back so that she saw Kirk.

"Yes, Har, it is your heroic Captain," Ketirah said with a smirk. Kirk steeled himself not to react outwardly as Lorak suddenly whipped out a dagger which flashed dazzlingly in the sun, and laid its sharp edge against Har's throat. She moaned softly and closed her eyes. Ketirah chuckled, sensing Kirk's emotions.

"No, we do not plan for her to die so quickly, just as we have special plans for you and your friends. But if you attempt to use the phaser, my son will slit her throat, nevertheless." Kirk felt a slithering caress at the edge of his mind and instinctively jerked back his head. "Yes, Captain, without a booster I can still take your mind - possess it - crush it. I need no frenzy to accomplish that, either. You are completely at my mercy."

Kirk suddenly had a fleeting impression that someone was just behind him, but a quick sideways glance revealed no one. Another trick of Ketirah's? "You might have me but a starship is more than its Captain. How many of you are left? A few thousand? When the Federation finds you - and they will - how long do you think you can hold out against the combined might of Starfleet?"

"Your Starfleet will never find us behind our invisibility screen. And even if they did, they are weak - their way is conciliatory, peaceful. They have no stomach for a fight. You forget, Captain; you showed me all that when I ransacked your mind. Do not think to deceive me with petty threats. If they come here they will find your ship a drifting hulk - and the same thing will happen to their ships as yours. They will be arena fodder too."

Kirk's neck prickled as he once more received a strong impression of someone standing close beside him. But Ketirah's next words distracted him.

"Yes, I can control you, Human, but I would find it more amusing if you gave yourself to me of your own free will." Ketirah glanced at her son who reluctantly, or so it appeared to Kirk, put away his knife and pulled Har to her feet. The young woman suddenly jerked back her head, face twisted in a grimace of agony though she did not scream. Twisting, she fell to the ground before her mother and convulsed in the dust.

"No!" The protest was wrung from Kirk though he recognised that it was useless. Abruptly, however, Har gave a last wrench of her body and lay still, sobbing harshly.

"In her mind I can put her through any torture imaginable," Ketirah explained, her dark eyes glinting in the

sunlight. "For example, she now thinks she is chained to a burning table - "

An agonised scream cut off her words as Har's body arched, writhing. Scream after scream was torn from her throat -

"All right!" Kirk shouted. "Whatever you want from me - " A hand on his arm made him stop... but there was no one there! Hair rose on the back of his neck but he suddenly became aware of a warm, all-embracing presence, opening and accepting him into itself. Something told him that the core of it was Marianne but there was no resemblance between this and the nightmare experience when she and the others had forced their way into his mind. As if his memory had touched hers, a feeling of sadness and shame pulsed through the link and realising they emanated from her, he tried to project his forgiveness and understanding. As the link closed protectively around him, he knew instinctively that, although other Mardrata were present within it, only Marianne, Arwen and Levi Telkma were physically present. In his mind's eye he could 'see' them beside him and knew that Arwen and Levi were co-ordinating their illusions - something only possible through the telepathic bond.

I tried to leave him behind but he insisted on coming. Arwen's good natured teasing of Levi was channelled by Marianne to Kirk.

You may be Chief but you're not back to full strength after that mind torture, the old man chided.

Feeling rather disoriented, Kirk saw a shape step forward as if out of his own body, and as it moved toward the Vendasi, he saw that it was wearing a gold shirt with Captain's stripes on the sleeve. With a jolt, he realised that the Tithoniél beside him had created an illusion of himself and that he, too, must be enwrapped in their invisibility screen. Through Marianne he sensed the added strain on the two and the almost miraculous way that they instinctively projected an image of what lay behind all four of the group - an image which matched exactly with the real objects and hence made all four 'invisible'. Keeping close together, the four began to edge toward Har who lay, sobbing, on the ground.

"Crawl, Human. We want to see you crawl on your belly." Against the wall of the link, Kirk could feel the cruel anticipation of the Vendasi, eager to see their proud victim humiliated. Then Arwen reached out and put a hand over Har's mouth as Marianne extended the mind link to her. Kirk 'saw' that Har's mind slotted into it differently than his; she formed a direct link in the chain rather than a subsidiary part cocooned by Marianne. Har stood up, leaving another, seemingly solid, copy of herself on the ground, and they began to move away, Kirk sweating at the crippling strain that the burden of the extra copy and larger area of 'invisibility' was placing on the Tithoniél.

In the near distance, bright beams stabbed down accompanied by the unmistakable sound of the ship's phasers. Instantly, a message came from Carolyn at the beam up point. *The Vendasi are attacking from the South and East - Enterprise is knocking them out.* Behind the group, Ketirah's scream of fury sounded and there was a sudden thunderbolt of rage which crashed against the Casreem shield but did not penetrate. Kirk realised that it had been meant for him and would have consumed his unprotected mind in an instant. All five broke into a run, the scream rising from a thousand throats behind them telling Kirk that the Tithoniél had abandoned all their illusions. Still running, he fired behind him, keeping his body between Ketirah's wand and Har who stumbled along helped by Marianne and Arwen. Orange fire scorched his left shoulder but none of Ketirah's other shots came close. Hampered by Har's bonds and weakened condition, and Levi's age, however, the small band was failing to keep their distance from their pursuers.

Then, answer to a prayer, bright beams of light stabbed down from the sky, sweeping over the mob and dropping Vendasi in hundreds. As Kirk and the others neared the beam up point, Spock and about thirty red shirted figures came running toward them, adding their own well-directed fire to the Enterprise's wide-dispersal stun beams. For a few moments all was confusion but then it seemed that the immediate danger was over. All Ketirah's following had been rendered unconscious as had the three or four thousand more who had attacked on the other fronts. Most of the crew were now aboard Enterprise as Spock informed his Captain before he was interrupted by the arrival of McCoy, grinning to see that Kirk was safe. Kirk felt Marianne gently disentangle him from the link and experienced a momentary pang of regret at the loss of the sense of wholeness and belonging among the Mardrata which he had shared, but then other matters claimed his attention.

"Captain Kirk, my people understand that your Federation have granted Marianne's people a safe haven. We would like very much to join them."

Kirk eyed Dwiold shrewdly, fully understanding the exile's wish - coinciding with their long-held dream of living in peace when the Vendasi died out - but at the same time irked at their lack of willingness to solve the problem. They had skulked in the wilderness for centuries while untold numbers of non-psychics had died for Vendasi entertainment without even attempting to warn the outside universe.

"Is there no way for you and the Vendasi to reach an agreement? For the killing to stop - "

"No!" Dwiold shouted then added, more calmly. "No, I'm sorry, Captain, but our views are diametrically opposed and after today they will never allow us to live here unmolested."

"He's right." Released from her bonds, Har shakily left McCoy who had been examining her. "My mother thirsts for revenge on all of us," she added, shuddering.

Kirk glanced at Spock beside him then nodded. "If the Mardrata agree, then the exiles can resettle on Mardrata-va," he conceded. There were quiet but excited murmurings from the assembled exiles though most did not lose their anxious and haunted expressions, glancing frequently over to the mass of unconscious Vendasi a few hundred metres away.

As the exiles began beaming up, Kirk spoke quietly to Spock and McCoy. "I don't like it... the Vendasi apparently slaughtered hundreds of their slaves, earlier. Even if they don't murder any more of them, it still means leaving the status quo here... They'll rebuild exactly the same immoral society as before."

"I don't see what you can do, Jim, apart from making sure Starfleet puts this place off limits and warns everyone. We can destroy their ships - that'll slow 'em down for a while but they'll rebuild 'em eventually. And in the meantime they'll be killing their slaves in the arena."

"Still... We've got to try one more time, Bones. If we take Ketirah to the Enterprise - alone, where she's got no one to back her - "

"Captain, the only thing which would prevent further bloodshed would be a convincing threat of retaliation by the Federation."

"Hmm, yes. If we could put a string of satellites in orbit to monitor them - combined with a modification of your jammer - we could rig them to transmit data continuously. Any disruption in transmission and we'd send a starship."

The Vulcan nodded. "And, although convinced of our weakness in their terms, Captain, certain harassing measures which would not cause serious harm, should not be ruled out."

"You mean we could make it difficult for them?" McCoy put in. "Spray them with itching powder?"

"Something like that, Bones," Kirk agreed, smiling. "I see the monitoring as part of a short term measure - I don't like the idea but in the long term, the Federation might agree to a tranquillising beam of some kind, fired from devices in orbit that would be triggered off by aggressive behaviour. Not ethical... but it might save a lot of people going through what some of our people went through." Kirk's expression darkened momentarily as he recalled the bloodied spear, the flogged backs, the bones floating on the water. Turning away, he ordered two of the security team to fetch Ketirah.

Moments later, one of them returned. "Sir... there's a boy holding her hand - we can't get his hand open, sir. It's locked tight."

Surprised, Kirk realised that he must mean Lorak. "All right, Ensign. Bring them both over here - detail extra men."

By now all the exiles had beamed up with the exception of Dwiold. The young man was talking to Spock, Kirk noticed.

"Someone will have to stay here to make sure no harm comes to the jammer."

"There is no need for concern. If necessary, I shall remain."

"No, Spock," Kirk put in. "I'll need you on the ship. Har told me that the Vendasi find your telepathic ability disturbing - that might give us an edge in getting them to be reasonable. One of the security personnel can look after the jammer."

"That might not be wise," Dwiold put in. "As a telepath, I'll have more warning than one of your people of when the Vendasi start to revive. Pretence will not conceal their thoughts from me. I'll keep guard and teleport clear if there's any danger."

Kirk nodded. "All right. We'll keep this area under sensor scan. If they start waking up, we'll stun them again so keep to this middle area."

"Good luck, Dwiold," Har said, smiling wanly as she took her place with some of the Mardrata who were beaming up. Though pale, she appeared to have recovered from her ordeal.

In a few minutes, all the Humans and others had gone, leaving Dwiold to stand guard over thousands of sleeping Vendasi in a silent city. Resigned to a long wait, the exile climbed onto the topside of the Mardratan ship where he could command a good view of the landing area. Behind him, the sun was at last sinking behind the buildings, casting long shadows over the earth.

Alert as he was, Dwiold failed to see the figure crouched in the gloom of a doorway. Having left Kirk's party after guiding them from the prison, intent on rejoining her family, Zhodal had been forced to hide in a dark cupboard for hours, hardly daring to breathe while she listened to screams and shouts which were sometimes distant, sometimes very near. But a short while ago there had been a strange brief humming sound, repeated a few times and then quietness. Now, when she at last had found the courage to take a look, she could see no one except a brown clad figure sitting atop one of the ships - presumably a master, since he held one of the orange sticks which masters always took with them when they flew away to return with holds full of chained prisoners. Where were the strangers she had helped - had the masters killed them after all? And where were the other masters?

Crouching low and keeping to the shadows, Zhodal gradually made her way round the landing site perimeter until at the southern end, not far from the seated master, she saw many bodies - hundreds, perhaps thousands. Surely he had killed her friends, the strangers? Saddened, she crept nearer, her grey tunic indistinct in the deepening gloom. At last, she neared the most outlying of the sprawled shapes. No, she saw, there were many more than the strangers and - Terror made her back away. They were masters! She had fallen into their trap.

At her horrified gasp, the sentry master swung round; as he began to move, Zhodal flung herself down and lay as still as the masters. Sweating despite the sudden chill wind that heralded sundown, she remained still for some minutes and when she dared to raise her head a little, she saw the master, picked out by the last rays shining between the buildings, still atop his skyship, still apparently unaware. Her heart slowing, she stood up, dividing her attention fearfully between him and the prone bodies at her feet. They had not moved at all as far as she could tell and drawn by curiosity, she crept closer.

No, they were not dead... she could hear them breathing. It must be a trick. Poised to run away, something drew her, in spite of her fear, to stretch out a hand and touch one. The cheek was warm. She had never touched a master before; she had thought they must be cold to be so cruel. Fascinated, she traced her fingers over the face and shoulders... why did the master not leap up and grab her? It was too dark to even see if the master she touched was male or female but her ears hinted at something and she crouched still, listening intently. Their breathing... deep, regular, like the breathing of her family when she lay among them in the dark sometimes, unable to sleep, thinking. Thinking how she hated the masters - that was it! The revelation hit her like a blinding light. The masters were asleep... with only one master to guard them. Exultation surged up inside Zhodal, making her want to dance, to sing, to cry out for joy, but she clamped her jaws tightly shut. She must get to the slaves quarters and tell them all. She would need help for this...

"How is he, Bones?" Kirk looked down at the sleeping Kledo, now bathed and dressed in sickbay pyjamas, his gaunt face relaxed at last in peaceful sleep.

"Well, Jim, you really have to ask Carolyn."

"Carolyn?"

"The Casreem telepathic healer - apparently, certain individuals have a natural ability to soothe psychic wounds. She told me it would take a while though - she's only given him the first stage of the treatment."

Kirk nodded. "What about Ketirah and the boy?"

"They're coming round now. We've removed their boosters and we've got Marianne and a few of the others standing by to mind shield anyone who goes near them. I shouldn't say it, Jim, but I almost wish we could put those lumps of telpanite we brought back from that planet in there with them."

Kirk recalled the headbands Gevron had given his landing party to wear. "It'd also interfere with the Mardratans'

abilities, Bones. And it wouldn't have good associations for Marianne.'

"Mari - hell, Jim, what am I thinking of?" Embarrassed at his momentary lapse of memory, McCoy led Kirk in silence to see the Vendasi. As they approached the room, he felt the link questing out and then tentatively enfolding itself around him so that when the door opened, he - and McCoy, also, he realised - were protected from the two Vendasi. He was momentarily disconcerted by a strong sense of embarrassment and awkwardness, thinking it must emanate from the doctor but then realised that it was coming from Marianne. Seeing that Phil Surrey was one of the security guards posted on either side of the door, he knew why and immediately cursed himself for not ensuring that Surrey was detailed elsewhere. McCoy was not the only one guilty of overlooking the obvious where Marianne was concerned. Unable to remedy the situation at present, he turned his attention to the bed where Ketirah sat, her son, still semi-conscious, clasping her hand. Irritated, she glanced at Lorak who clumsily took his hand away - evidently at a telepathic command from her.

"Don't show weakness - " she continued verbally, then seemed to realise where she was and bounded to her feet. Ensign Surrey aimed his phaser at her immediately, and she subsided, though eyeing all of them with hatred. Lorak, now fully awake, sat up looking very alarmed.

"You regained control of the Enterprise," Ketirah began furiously, then added more calmly, "Of course - your tame teleporters. I was not so unaware that I did not notice the ship which took off."

Kirk reflected wryly that he, on the other hand, had failed to notice - probably because he was facing a mass of frenzied Vendasi at the time.

"Your phasers stunned us - again, your sentimental weakness."

"We prefer to call it respect for life," Kirk responded evenly. "All sentient life, no matter what its form - or whether or not it is psi-gifted."

"Then you cannot act," Ketirah retorted with a triumphant smile. "Even if you escape, our people will continue to harvest yours. Warn your Federation, Human, but you cannot stop our raids. You cannot stand against our powers."

Kirk glanced at Marianne beside him, an idea forming from McCoy's earlier suggestion. Knowing the Casreem could pick up 'vocalised' thoughts, he quickly explained what he wanted to do, apologising for reawakening such painful memories. The Mardratan woman paled but nodded and sent a rapid thought message to Carolyn, Michael and Arwen who were grouped behind her. All three moved over into the far corner of the room. Spock raised an enquiring eyebrow but said nothing, while McCoy frowned, evidently appraised by his Captain's partner as to what was happening.

Captain, be careful. The telpanite will also interfere with our ability to protect you and the others - though not totally if we maintain our distance, Marianne warned.

Sensing the exchange, Ketirah sat down beside her son.

"What is it? What are you planning?"

"We do have a way of curtailing your powers," Kirk replied, his voice grim. "Our scientific knowledge is more advanced than you once cared to admit - with the primitive materials at his disposal, my First Officer was still able to construct a device which jammed your boosters. But that was just a temporary measure. We recently discovered a mineral which interferes with all psychic abilities. It won't take our scientists long to duplicate its effect artificially and place devices in orbit around your planet which will reduce your people to psi-nulls." He turned to Ensign Surrey. "Fetch one of the telpanite fragments from the labs, Ensign."

"You must think me a child to believe such a story," Ketirah scoffed but Kirk detected a note of uncertainty in her voice. "If this were true, I would have detected it in your mind."

"Perhaps you did not know what to look for? The proof will be here in a moment," Kirk responded, thankful that his thoughts were safe behind the shield. He doubted if Starfleet would ever countenance his bluff as a reality on ethical grounds but now that they realised the Vendasi threat, they would probably wish to develop a portable version to protect ships and personnel at least.

The door opened and Surrey entered bearing the small piece of blue stone. Kirk was instantly aware of a prickling discomfort and stepped back, aware of the look of pained intensity on the security guard's face: he, too, was experiencing the Mardratan reaction through his own link with them. The reaction of Ketirah and her son was more startling. Lorak sprang from the bed and ran to the corner of the room, burying his head in his hands as he crouched, moaning. Ketirah, more controlled, got to her feet and backed away until the wall prevented further retreat.

"No..." she murmured, her dark eyes wide. For the first time, Kirk saw fear in them.

Marianne spoke. "It gets worse the nearer the proximity. Physical contact with the head is acutely painful - believe me, I know."

Ketirah looked at her, not understanding.

"That experience I mentioned at the hands of psi-nulls - it was true. They put a headband on me - with a piece of that stone fixed to it." Marianne did not quite succeed in keeping the horror from her voice.

Ketirah turned to look at the tiny blue stone in Surrey's hand. "And yet you help these - these - "

"Not all psi-nulls are alike," Arwen put in. "What you've been doing is wrong - it would be wrong done to non-sentient animals let alone people."

"But... they are..." Ketirah closed her eyes, her face pale with shock.

"Animals or not, you can become the same as them," Marianne emphasised.

"What must we do?" Ketirah opened her eyes, looking at Kirk.

"Your 'entertainments' must cease. You must reach an understanding with the psi-nulls on your planet. They must no longer be slaves."

"But... we cannot survive without their labour - "

"You must learn to. Ask them to teach you the things you need to know. We'll help you - and we'll help you to come to terms with them," Kirk promised.

Ketirah nodded, all the fight seemingly gone out of her. "I will consider all this."

Kirk smiled. "Good. We'll talk in more detail later." He instructed Surrey to return the telpanite to the labs.

"I'll stay, Captain," Marianne volunteered. "The others should get some rest."

"All right, but don't take any chances. I'll... reassign Ensign Surrey."

Marianne blushed. "Sorry, I didn't mean you to pick that up. No, don't; it... it's best not to run away from problems."

Nodding, Kirk left with the others, only Marianne and the other security guard remaining with the two Vendasi. Looking dazed, Ketirah wandered over to her son who still cowered in the corner, and laid a hand comfortingly on his shoulder.

Do not be afraid, Lorak. We will seem to agree to their plan, then we will follow them in our ships, teleport aboard and destroy them. They cannot have much of that stone or they would have worn it for protection from the beginning. And we will find their jammer and destroy it - if necessary, we will leave our planet and find another where they cannot find us again.

Eyes wide and bright with tears, Lorak gazed at his mother.

Do nothing to betray our intention, she cautioned him. We will act afraid and broken. She stood up and announced, "We will rest now," before going back to the bed.

Marianne took a seat, prepared for a long vigil. She glanced up as the door opened and Surrey returned, then looked away quickly. She was aware of his mind, enwrapped in her own mind shield as Kirk's had been, and his own embarrassment and awkwardness. It was up to her to ease matters.

"Phil, I - I'm glad you made it."

The man started, then glanced at her, his face flushing.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to - I'm not reading your thoughts, I swear. Only the ones you put into words - for me to

hear.

Surrey smiled sheepishly then glanced at his companion.

It's all right - this is a private communications link. No one else can hear, she assured him, projecting amusement.

Thanks. I - I'm glad you made it too... even if I don't exactly understand what's been happening. It - you and some friends of yours came to get us out, right?

Got it in one.

Well, thanks - thanks from all of us. I... He paused uncomfortably. *I never had the chance to say sorry for what happened when you were here before. It - it's funny, you come into the service to see other planets, other lifeforms... I guess you find it easier to accept people who look different - Vulcans or Andorians - than human beings who are just different in some way that doesn't show. Anyway - well, I guess you know I'm just trying to say I'm sorry for the way we treated you when you were part of the crew.*

Marianne felt herself blush, aware of a curious stare from the other security guard. *I... I appreciate it, Phil.* She smiled and looked back at the two Vendasi lying on the bed, eyes closed as if peacefully asleep. For a moment she was thankful that her conversation with Surrey had been on a telepathic level - what capital Ketirah could have made of Phil's mistaken belief that she and the other Mardratans were human beings. A fine opportunity to sow distrust and suspicion among the Humans. But then she realised that the privacy worked both ways; Ketirah and Lorak also might have shared communication - conspired together - unknown to Marianne. Seemingly subjugated and yet... maybe Ketirah had given in a little too easily? Resolving to watch the Vendasi more closely, Marianne folded her arms and used the mental techniques she had learned as a child to banish her fatigue.

Zhodal steadfastly marched on toward the blazing lights, which momentarily came into sharp focus then reblurred as more tears brimmed from her eyes. A smaller conflagration to her right marked the position of another vast horde of slaves, no doubt further away. She brushed back tears but again the individual flames of the torches they held merged into one mass.

The slaves' quarters... At first she had been unaware of what the vast heaps could be that blocked the streets but when she had clambered onto them, she had realised that they were people - dead people. Unlike the ones at the landing site, these did not breathe, were not warm beneath her bare feet. Over the years she had seen many dead bodies, dragged from the arena for burial, but this... Her hesitant fingers had touched the coarse material of a slave's grey tunic in the darkness and her horrified understanding had struggled to accept what had happened. The masters had gone mad - that much she knew. She had heard their howls and, heeding the words of the hazel eyed stranger whom she had helped, had taken refuge in the nearest building. Eager though she had been when she had parted from him and the others to find her family, his seriousness had still left its mark when he had warned her to hide from the masters who would take revenge on her for helping him and his friends.

Crouching on dead bodies in the dark, horror had swept over her as she realised that the slaves she had locked in the prison would also have been murdered if the crazed masters had found them. She had not realised... as slaves they had to obey and the masters could not condemn them for that. They were not expected to have courage or spirit. But now... slaves lay dead. She had sensed the blacker masses against the dark; the street was blocked with the dead.

Now, having detoured around the slaves' quarters, she had emerged into the frighteningly open countryside. She had never been out of the city in her life and to stumble along this path with no sheltering walls on either side was terrifying. Only the lights ahead and the solidity of the fence gripped under her hand kept her going.

A single flame burned just ahead and then approached, a man's features visible in its flickering light. A strong face, lined with exposure to the sun, the skin ruddy in the torchlight. A slave's blunt, reassuring features. "Who is it?" he called, sounding a little afraid.

"Zhodal... my name is Zhodal." She gasped and nearly fell but the man caught her with a strong hand.

"You've come from the city... we thought everyone was dead. The only ones who escaped came before sundown."

"I hid from the masters. They - they killed..." Zhodal's voice choked.

"I know. They killed our city brothers and sisters, all but the few who escaped. You must be strong - we must get away -"

"No!" The word burst from Zhodal's mouth as she remembered her intention. She saw the man's eyes upon her questioningly, almost expectant. Of course; he was a slave - he wanted to be told what to do. "The - the masters lie in the landing area -" She saw his frown of non comprehension. "It is a large open space near the centre of the city. They lie there sleeping."

"Sleeping?"

"Yes, they - they are exhausted after murdering so many of us. One of them guards their sleep but he is the only sentry."

"Then we must escape while they sleep -" the man began eagerly but Zhodal interrupted him.

"I have a better idea. If we leave they will hunt us down and kill us like the others. No, we must enter the city and..." Zhodal paused, the enormity of putting her thoughts into words daunting, despite her grief and anger at the massacre. "We must kill them while they sleep," she finished softly.

"Kill them?" the man echoed, then nodded. "Yes... yes, I see. You are right. It is what we must do."

"We need weapons - have you any?"

The man frowned. "That is not for slaves..."

"But you must have - knives - things to - to cut the plants with." Zhodal's idea of the farm workers' activities was only vague but the man saw her meaning.

"Yes, the scythes, the forks, yes - they would make weapons." His teeth shone red in the torch glow. "The knives we butcher the livestock with - yes, we have many weapons. But what of the master who guards them?"

"I remember where he sat. Give me a knife and I will do it. You and the others must hide so he does not see your torches - then I will call to you to come and kill the rest."

"It is a good plan." There was respect in the man's voice.

"What is your name?" Zhodal asked, realising that she did not know.

"Aule," he replied.

"Aule." Zhodal paused as if savouring the name then said, "Go, Aule, and tell your people. We must do this thing in silence. Tell them to gather weapons and then come to me - in silence. I will lead them into the city." As the man hurried away, Zhodal turned to face the darkened city; there were no slaves to tend the glow lamps tonight. Her family... were they among the cold figures choking the streets or were they somewhere out among the farm workers? There would be time in the morning to see if they had survived.

For now there was work to be done...

"I wish to see that my people are safe before I agree. Tell your Captain." Ketirah had awoken from her sleep apparently still subdued but Marianne thought she detected a gleam of defiance in her dark eyes, and Lorak seemed on edge as if concealing excitement.

The other guard glanced at Phil Surrey.

"It's all right, Enrico," Surrey answered him. "We can handle things here." They waited in silence while he went out to use the Doctor's intercom to contact the bridge. He returned a few minutes later.

"Captain's order is to escort you to the bridge... aa'am."

"Very well," Ketirah responded. As she and Lorak left the room with the two men, Marianne held back then slipped quickly after them. In the corridor en route to the turbolift, they encountered Har. Marianne repressed her

instinctive repulsion to the young woman; she knew that Har's apparent bloodlust had resulted from her tortured existence as daughter of the leader of a society dominated by cruelty, and yet she could not help but feel Har was tainted by her people's sickness... and perhaps by extension the Mardrata themselves.

"Where are you taking them?" the young woman demanded.

Surrey glanced uncertainly at Marianne then said, "Bridge."

"The Captain has persuaded Ketirah to re-educate her people," Marianne added. "They're going to live in peace with the slaves." She did not quite manage to keep the note of scepticism from her voice.

"But that's impossible!" Har exclaimed. "You know what they're like - killers, murderers. It's in their blood."

"In your blood too, daughter," reminded Ketirah. "I saw you mow down our people. The Captain has shown me a rock which eliminates psychic abilities. If we do not co-operate, its effect will be reproduced and will cover our planet - we will be reduced to animals."

It's true, Marianne sent to Har, but I don't trust her anyway. Aloud, she said, "Ensign Surrey, Har is a telepath. I could use her help on the bridge. I've arranged for a couple of others to join us there also."

Surrey looked at her in surprise then smiled sheepishly as he realised how she had 'arranged' it. "All right, I don't think the Captain will mind in the circumstances."

"Thanks." Har smiled tightly, gripping the slim orange wand concealed by her sleeve and hand. Her precaution in borrowing it from an exile had been worthwhile; she wanted protection while aboard the same vessel as her mother and would now be able to protect the Captain and the others. She drew back as Marianne hesitantly offered to open the link to her; as she had hoped, the Mardratan's reservations about her did not lead her to press the offer. She understood Marianne's instinctive revulsion; until she had seen the maddened Vendasi strike at the slaves, she had not realised that she could kill - and kill without compunction. Perhaps she had not been free from all the Vendasi contamination after all - she had inherited the killer streak but at a deeper level. Somehow she would have to live with that knowledge.

As Marianne and the others entered the bridge, they found Carolyn and three of the other Casreem waiting; all Human minds there were safe inside the mindlink.

"I want to see that my people are safe," Ketirah reiterated.

"Of course. Mr Spock?" Kirk enquired.

As Spock explained the sensor readings to Ketirah, Marianne asked Carolyn if the Vendasi below were recovering from the stun charge yet.

They showed signs of it just before you came in; the Captain ordered another sweep of the ship's phasers. They'll be out for hours yet.

Good. I'll be glad when we're away from here.

Hmm, I know what you mean.

Ketirah stepped away, appearing satisfied with the demonstration of the sensory instruments and Kirk ordered Chekov to relieve Spock; they would conduct further talks in the briefing room. But as the whole party started toward the lift, Chekov spoke, halting them.

"Keptin, I'm... picking up a large movement of people just entering the city. They're not Vendasi; they're similar to Human readings... they appear to be carrying fiery torches."

"The slaves!" Har exclaimed. "They've come to see what those murderers have done to their people, to bury their dead."

"Killing animals is not murder," Ketirah retorted angrily. "You are the murderer."

A look of agonised fury distorted Har's features. Abruptly, she sprang forward, her fingers crooked into claws. Ketirah grabbed her forearms, flinging her violently away. Unable to keep her balance, the young woman careered backwards into Chekov who fell heavily against the edge of the console, striking his head. As Har shakily picked herself up, Kirk and Spock hurried over to examine the fallen man, then Kirk turned to face the communications officer.

"Uhura, get McCoy up here."

As Uhura speedily complied, Har, white faced and supporting herself against the science station asked, "Is he all right? He's not -"

"No, he's unconscious. Don't worry, McCoy will be here in a moment."

"I can heal him," Har volunteered, bending down and stretching out her hand.

"Spock, have someone relieve Chekov and join us in the briefing-room," Kirk instructed, stepping over to rejoin the others. His face reflected concern for the young officer but he knew there could be no delay if he were to successfully negotiate an end to the bloodletting.

"Captain -"

Something in Spock's voice made Kirk turn quickly, filled with a presentiment of disaster. "What is it, Spock?"

"The slaves have overrun the landing area... readings are unclear but - they appear to be killing the Vendasi."

"No!" An agonised scream sounded across the bridge. "No - you murderers! You planned this!"

"Spock - use the ship's phasers -" Kirk gave the order, turning back to try to restrain Ketirah but as he did so, he caught a cry of warning from one of the Casreem followed by a red wave of pain and a sensation of blackness. When his vision cleared, he saw a phaser in Ketirah's hand, pointed directly at him. The Casreem were pale with shock; Carolyn swayed and was caught by Marianne. Then he saw why; one of the two security guards lying on the deck was fringed by a spreading red stain: Carolyn must have been mind shielding him. A bloodied knife in Lorak's hand supplied the reason; irrationally Kirk wondered who had failed to search him properly.

"Killers! The slaves have no spirit - you have led them into this."

"Ketirah, it's none of our doing. Spock will stun them and save the rest -"

"Killers!" Ketirah fired wildly at Spock whose hands were reaching for the phaser controls. He leaped clear, the shot meant for him striking the navigation console which erupted in a shower of sparks. Beside it, Sulu was flung to one side. Ketirah's phaser swung to cover Kirk who sensed Spock picking himself up and knew that the Vulcan would throw himself in the path of the next shot.

"Spock, no," he protested softly. Then as if in slow motion, he saw the shocked Mardratans start into life, hands reaching for Ketirah as one - but they would never reach her in time. An orange beam stabbed out from Kirk's other side, enveloping the Vendasi leader. Her face registered surprise and an instant of pain, then blanked as she folded to the floor, the phaser falling from her lifeless fingers. Half turning, Kirk saw Har still crouched by Chekov's prone body, her knuckles white around the wand, her blue eyes staring at Ketirah's body.

"Mother!" The scream came from Lorak not Har, his face twisting in grief. Then his arm moved in a blur of speed and there was an impression of something flashing toward Kirk as Lorak launched himself after it.

"Aaaagh!" The knife buried itself in Har's frozen form. As she clutched the hilt protruding beneath her ribs, Lorak slid to his knees in front of her and wrenched the blue buckle from her belt. Kirk lunged for him but he jerked aside, triumph struggling with grief on his face. A moment later he vanished.

The sound of the turbolift door opening restored reality. "What the hell -" Taking in the scene at a glance, McCoy wove his way between the Mardratans, bending briefly to check Ketirah and the two security guards. Face grim, he instructed Uhura to summon a medical team then moved over to Har.

As McCoy administered a painkiller, Har, her face chalk white, gasped, "I - can - heal this doctor. Take the knife out - slowly."

Shocked, McCoy glanced up and met Kirk's eyes. "Do as she says, Bones." Then Kirk moved over to Uhura, ordering

that all security guards beam down immediately to stun the slaves.

"It's too late, Jim," Spock's quiet voice brought Kirk to a halt. As he met his friend's gaze he read the answer he dreaded. "The slaves are leaving the landing area," Spock confirmed. "None of the Vendasi are alive... except one immature male just outside the city."

"Lorak," Kirk murmured, then turned to Uhura. "Cancel that order, Lieutenant," he said heavily before moving over to Sulu. The helmsman was sitting up, blackened and scorched but attempting to make light of his injuries.

"I'm all right, Captain... only hurts when I laugh."

"Just take it easy, help'll be here in a moment," Kirk reassured him, glancing over to where Har sat, her hand gripping McCoy's wrist, governing the speed at which he withdrew the dagger. He was glad to hear the turbolift doors swish open behind him. The medical team briskly organised the removal of the injured helmsman, Chekov, Ketirah and the two security guards. He noticed Marianne twisting her hands together as she watched them go.

"Marianne?" he asked, concerned. The Mardratan woman attempted a smile.

"I'm all right. It's... Phil Surrey." Kirk remembered the pool of blood beside the red shirted figure but Marianne forestalled him. "No, it's all right - he wasn't the poor man who was killed. He's still alive but... she hit him on the neck. I just hope he'll pull through." She sighed, "Well, there's nothing more we can do here. I think I'll get some sleep."

"I'll detail someone to show you the temporary quarters," Kirk offered.

"No need, Jim," Marianne responded, tapping her head. "I have a built in direction finder - if any of my lot are still awake down there." She suddenly looked discomforted and blushed before turning to follow the others into the lift. A puzzled frown creased Kirk's brow before he realised why she should be embarrassed; she had never called him by his name before. He was no longer within the Casreem mind link he also realised; this time the tension of the past few minutes had disguised the sensation of dissolution. With a slight rueful smile he turned back to where McCoy was running a scanner over the young Vendasi woman. Blood stained her tunic and the knife lying on the deck beside her but, although still pale, she was not as deathly white as before.

"Well, as far as I can tell from these crazy readings, there's no trace of that injury." He helped Har to stand, adding, "I still want you in sickbay though for observation."

"Don't worry, Doctor. I shall welcome the rest." Appearing exhausted, she allowed him to lead her to the elevator; watching her go, Kirk suspected she would need McCoy's therapeutic skills to help her overcome the traumas of the past two days.

The lift doors opened, discharging a clean up crew who zeroed in on the damaged navigation console and commenced to strip it down, and a relief crewwoman for Sulu's station. McCoy and Har stepped into the lift and headed for sickbay. Suppressing a sigh, Kirk ordered Uhura to contact the USS Yorktown then walked over to the First Officer who was still observing the planet surface. The Vulcan straightened at his approach.

"The slaves are abandoning the city now, Captain, firing it as they leave."

Kirk nodded, unsurprised. "A gigantic funeral pyre, Spock - for the hopes of peace between two races." Although his friend did not reply, he senses the Vulcan's empathy. "Would Ketirah have kept the bargain? We'll never know."

"Indeed." Spock paused then added softly, "I regret that the jamaer I constructed led to so many deaths."

Kirk directed a look of surprise at him. "It's usually you who tells me not to regret the things I can't alter," he said, his eyes meeting Spock's. He knew his friend read the understanding in them. "Spock, no one could have known that they'd react like that. We knew they'd be mad, sure - against us. Not against the slaves too."

Spock nodded, accepting the comfort Kirk offered. "They were not a logical people."

"No, just an obsessed and unstable one... and now only one true Vendasi remains."

"The boy."

"Yes... his upbringing made him a killer but he's still a child. Alone - on a planet full of enemies."

"Not entirely alone, Jim. He has one companion... hatred."

Zhodai and Aule stood together watching the burning city, trying to ease the memory of the things they had seen when they had left the huge crowd of slaves to their grisly work and gone to the prison, hoping to free Zhodai's former workmates. As she had feared, however, the light of their torches had revealed only contorted bodies in the little office; the masters had found them. Pausing only to fire the building they had returned to the landing area where thousands of slaves methodically hacked and stabbed at the prone bodies, making sure none had been overlooked.

"I do not know how to tend plants and animals," Zhodai murmured, her uncertainty about the future now uppermost in her mind.

"We will teach you - I will teach you."

They smiled at each other and moved away, arms slipping naturally around each other's waists. They did not see the small crouching figure that watched them go with hate filled, tear filled eyes as he turned the buckle with its uniform-blending blue stone over and over in his hands. A last link with his people. He had no weapon - yet. He would get one and become a lurking nemesis flitting beyond the watchfires, dealing death to those unwary enough to wander beyond the safety of their homes once darkness fell. Filling his mind with images of destruction and hate, he refused to admit the truth - that he was doomed to a lonely, half starved existence until the slaves banded together to hunt down this last of the murderers... as they would now that they had lost their fear of his kind.

He would not let himself think of that.

Wearily, Marianne slumped onto the bed, looking across at the sleeping Tithoniél leader. She wanted to sleep for a week after this: abruptly, she realised that Arwen was looking at her.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you."

"You didn't; I can't make my brain slow down at the moment."

"I know what you mean." Marianne bit her lip wondering if she should confide her worries.

"What is it, Mari? Our Vendasi passengers giving some trouble?"

"Not any more. Do - do you mind if we mind share?"

"Like before?" Arwen thought back to the first time she had met the young Casreem and entered her experiences in this way. "Of course, go ahead."

The sharing complete, Arwen lay still for a moment, staring at the ceiling. "Phew. I don't know what to say. To think I was lying here trying to sleep when that was going on." She sat up, facing the other woman squarely. "Looks like our problems solved for us."

"Because they're finished as a race you mean? They certainly underestimated the slaves - so did the exiles - I guess we all did. You know, I feel guilty - deep down I think I'm glad they're dead. It's a terrible thing to say..."

Arwen shook her head. "I know what you mean, Mari. That kind of mentality, entrenched for - thousands of years, since that's why our ancestors left. Jim's a born optimist; I don't think they'd ever have accepted. Only just enough so they could trick us later on."

"We can't be sure that our people came from here," Marianne began, defensively.

"Can't we? I checked with Bones before I came here - there's no doubt. We're too much alike physically, genetically, for us not to have common ancestors."

"Then you're saying that we're tainted with the same thing. The exiles objected like our ancestors but we've seen what they're capable of - Har, all of them. The same streak of callousness - Arwen, if we absorb them, admit them to Mardrata-va, what will that make us? In a way they're more of a threat than the Vendasi because their callousness is hidden most of the time. They'll only reinforce that tendency in us - if it is there. I'm not convinced, even if we

are related."

"Mari, we're not the only ones with a dark side - the Humans have that too. They've had just the same types of people in their history as the Vendasi. It's just that we're so used to being the victims of persecution from our time on Earth that we can't imagine ourselves dishing it out. We've come to regard ourselves as 'holier than thou' - incapable of cruelty. But we're not - and if we shut our eyes to that, we're in danger of displaying it ourselves if the circumstances are right. We have to control that streak - and make sure the exiles control it too, that they understand the danger and that it is wrong whatever the circumstances. We'll teach them and we won't be complacent - that's the lesson they've taught us."

Marianne smiled, the tension at last easing out of her. "You're right, as always."

With a wry grin, Arwen punched her friend lightly on the arm. "Come on - let's try to get some sleep. We've got a long day tomorrow."

